ANC

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE-JULY
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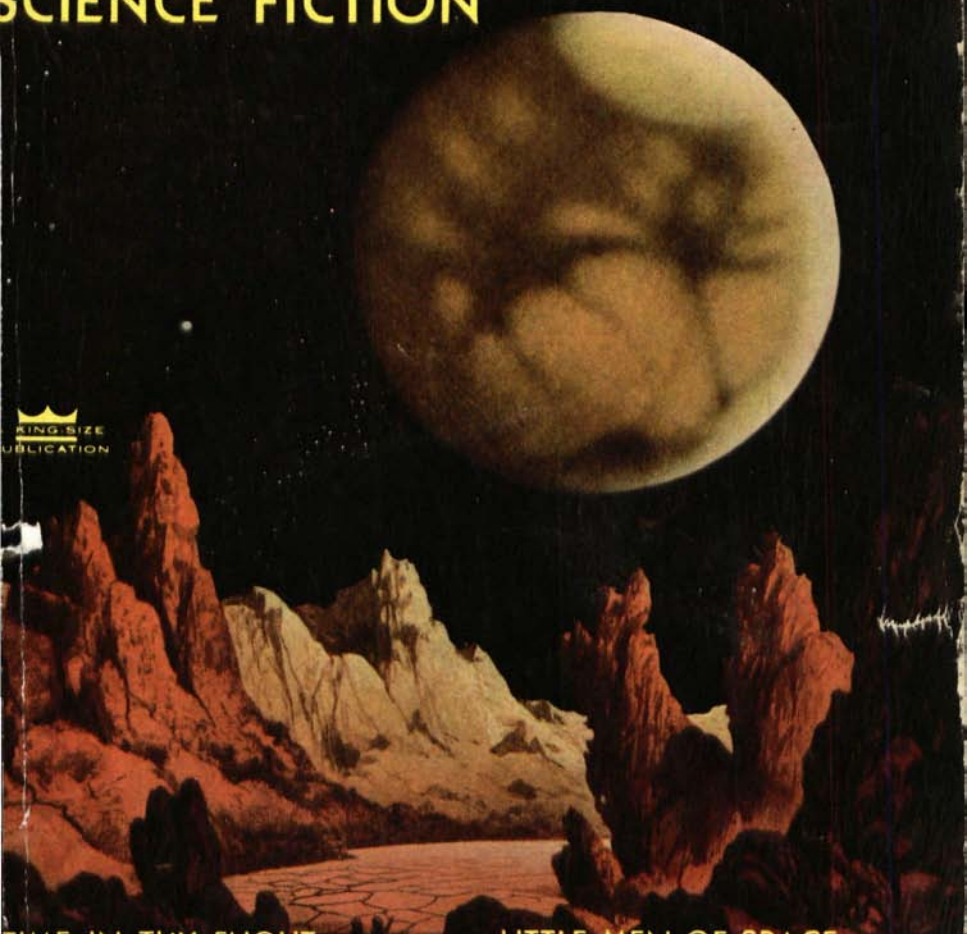

KING-SIZE
UBLICATION

TIME IN THY FLIGHT
by Ray Bradbury

LITTLE MEN OF SPACE
by Frank Belknap Long

THE OTHER TIGER
by Arthur C. Clarke

THE FIRE AND THE FLESH
by E. Hoffmann Price

ALL STORIES IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

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THE BROAD HORIZON

There has been a growing tendency in recent years to specialize within the already heavily specialized twin-fields of science fiction and fantasy. As in medicine, engineering and the other sciences, such specialization seems to have become the order of the day.

Thus we have magazines that deal only with the weird or occult, magazines limited to interplanetary fiction, magazines devoted to "heavy" science, to the sensational or to the earthier aspects of the field. The results of such self-limited appeal to splinter audiences have been thoroughly unhealthy.

All too often a fine story may get kicked around for years without finding a niche. Some in-betweeners may never be published at all or worse yet may never be written.

It is our purpose to plug these gaps with the finest off-trail fantasy and science fiction we can find Our aim is synthesis rather than specialization, reader entertainment on the most catholic possible scale rather than rigid "policy."

In this issue, for instance, you'll find an out-and-out fantasy, THE FIRE AND THE FLESH by E Hoffmann Price, sharing lead-story honors with a tale of the distant time-traveling future, TIME IN THY FLIGHT by Ray Bradbury and an intensely human story of the day just after tomorrow, NIGHTMARE TOWER by Jacques Jean Ferrat, an author new to the field.

You'll find by-lines of well-earned familiarity also upon display—A. Bertram Chandler, Eric Frank Russell, Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Belknap Long, August Derleth and Fletcher Pratt among them.

It is our intention to give you the greatest possible variety within the entire range of fantasy and science fiction. With this issue we believe we have come very close to our goal

Now get in there and read it and we hope you have fun.

—The Editor

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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nightmare tower

by . . . Jacques Jean Ferrat

Lynne disliked the man from Mars on sight. Yet drawn by forces beyond her control she let him carry her off to the Red Planet.

LYNNE FENLAY HAD HAD a few headaches in the course of her twenty-four years. But she had never had a headache like this.

There had been one as a result of her first field-hockey practice at the seminar, when she was twelve and the hard rubber ball caught her squarely above the left eye. There had been another, five years later, when she had used a guided trip to Manhattan during the Christmas holidays to experiment with a bottle of crême de menthe in the unaccustomed solitude of a hotel room. There had been a third as the result of overwork, while she was adjusting to her job with the group-machine.

Each of them had been the result of an easily discovered cause. This headache had come out of nowhere, for no perceptible reason. It showed no signs of going away. Lynne had visited a health-check booth as soon as she could find the time after the discomfort became noticeable. The stamped response on the card had been as disconcerting as it was vague—*Psychosomatic.*

Lynne looked across the neoplast tabletop at Ray Cornell and wondered with mild malevolence if her fiancé could be responsible for her discomfort. His spoonful of Helth-plankton halfway to his mouth,

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Ray was smiling at something Janet Downes had said. In her self-absorption Lynne had not heard Janet's remark. Knowing Janet as she did, however, she was certain it had undertones of sex.

With his fair height and breadth of shoulder, his tanned good-looking features beneath short-cropped light hair, Ray wore all the outward trademarks of a twelfth-century Viking chief or a twentieth-century football hero. But inside, Lynne thought, he was a Mickey Mouse. His very gentleness, his willingness to adjust, made him easily led.

Lynne forced herself to down another spoonful of Helthplankton and thought it tasted exactly like what it was—an artificial compound composed of sea-creatures, doctored up to taste like cereal.

Mother Weedon looked down at her from the head of the table and said, "What's the matter, Lynne—don't you feel well?"

"I'm all right, Mother Weedon," she said. She felt a pang of fear that stirred the discomfort between her temples. If she were really sick, mentally or physically, Mother Weedon might recommend that she be dropped from the team. After therapy she would be reassigned to some other group—and the thought was insupportable.

"Don't worry about our Lynne." Janet's tone bore a basis of mockery. "She has the stamina of a Messalina."

Damn Janet! Lynne regarded the other third of the team with resentment. Trust her to bring a name like Messalina into it. Even Ray caught the implied meaning and blushed beneath his tan. Mother Weedon looked at Lynne suspiciously.

"Better take things a bit easier," Mother Weedon suggested tolerantly. "After all, the team comes first."

"I know," Lynne said listlessly. She pushed her food away from her and waited sullenly while the others finished theirs. Unable to face the possibility of mental illness, she concentrated on Janet, wondered what the girl was trying to do.

There was always danger of conflict, she supposed, when two young women and a young man were set up as a team. Usually the members were balanced the other way or were all of one sex. But mentally at any rate Lynne and Janet meshed perfectly with Ray. So they had been assigned to live and work together on the group-machine under Mother Weedon's watchful eye. They had been together now for eleven months.

The trouble with Janet, Lynne thought, was that she wasn't the sort of girl who registered on men at first sight. She was tall, her lack of curves concealed by astute willowiness of movement, her half-homely face given second-glance allure by a deliberately and suggestively functional use of lips and eyes. Janet was competitively sexy.

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Lynne, who was as casually aware of her own blond loveliness as any well-conditioned and comely young woman, had not considered Janet seriously as a rival when she had fallen in love with Ray Cornell. Now, rubbed almost raw by the discomfort of her headache, Lynne decided she had underrated Janet. She was either going to have to get Ray back in line or turn him over to the other third of their team. Either way promised complications for the future . . .

The three of them walked the thousand meters to the brain-station, avoiding the moving sidewalk strips that would have sped them there in three minutes instead of fifteen. Lynne, who usually enjoyed the stroll through the carefully landscaped urban scenery, found herself resenting its familiarity. Besides, her head still ached.

As they moved past the bazaar-block, halfway to their destination, Lynne found herself wincing at the brightness of the window-displays. Usually she found the fluorescent tri-di shows stimulating—but not today. Nor was her mood helped when Janet, nodding toward the plasti-fur coats in one of them said, "I wish I'd lived a century ago, when a girl really had to work to win herself a mink coat."

And Ray replied with a smile she could only interpret as a leer, "You'd have been a right busy little mink yourself, Jan."

Janet gurgled and hugged his other arm and Lynne barely repressed an anti-social impulse to snap, "Shut *up!*" at both of them.

Lynne wondered what was wrong with her. Surely by this time she ought to be used to Janet's continuous and generally good-humored use of the sex challenge on any male in the vicinity. It hadn't bothered her much until the headache began two days ago. Nor had Ray's good-nature seemed such a weakness. Hitherto she had found it sweet.

On impulse she said, "You two go ahead. I'm going to have a colafizz. Maybe it will knock some of the beast out of me."

"You could stand having a little more of it knocked into you, darling," said Janet. This time Ray said nothing.

Lynne entered a pharmabar and pressed the proper buttons, sipped the stinging-sweet retort-shaped plastitumbler slowly. The mild stimulant relaxed her a little, caused the ache in her head to subside to a dull discomfort. She felt almost human as she took one of the moving strips the rest of the way so as not to be late to work.

Their studioff was situated halfway up the massive four-hundred meter tower of the brain-station. It was shaped like a cylinder cut in half vertically and contained a semicircular table with banks of buttons in front of each seat-niche. The walls were luminous in whatever color or series of colors was keyed to the problem faced by the team. At the moment it was blank,

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a sort of alabaster-ivory in tone.

Ray and Janet were already in their places. Their conversation ceased abruptly as Lynne entered and slid into her lounger and slipped on the collar that keyed her to the machine. She wondered what Janet had been saying about her, what Ray had been replying.

I'm turning into a paranoiac, she thought, managed a smile of sorts and said aloud, "What's today's problem?"

"Feel better, honey?" Ray asked her. Lynne nodded.

Janet, obviously uninterested, said, "Disposal of waste-foods so as to be useful to highway construction in Assam—without disruption of traffic-loads in Patagonia."

"Another of *those!*" said Lynne with a sigh. But she got to work almost automatically, keying her impulses to fit those of Ray and Janet. For the time being personal and emotional problems were laid aside. They were a single unit—a machine that was part of the greater machine—that was in turn part of the administration of Earth. For this work they had been trained and conditioned all their lives.

Early in the century—some fifty years back—when the cybernetic machine had been regulated to their proper functions of recording and assemblage only, of non-mathematical factors, the use of human teams, working as supplements to the machines themselves, had been conceived and formulated by the Earth Government.

No machine, however complex and accurate, could reflect truly the human factors in a problem of social import. For such functions it possessed the fatal weakness of being non-human. Hence the integration of people *and* atomo-electrical brains. Thanks to their collars the human factors received the replies of the machine-brains through mental impulses instead of on plasti-tape.

By means of the buttons before them they could key their questions to the portion of the machine desired. For specific requests and interkeying with one another they used, respectively, a small throat microphone attached to their collars and direct oral communication.

Janet was the analyst of the team—it was a detail job, a memory job, one which usually went to a woman. And she was good. She culled from the messages given her by the machine those which bore most directly upon the problem.

Assam — vegetarian culture — grain husks unused for plastics because of blight-weakness following second A-war—could serve as fifth-depth foundation for second-run non-moving byways . . . Patagonia first-line producer of non-weakened grain husks—transportation limited by seasonal deep-frost—atomic heat considered uneconomical for this problem—transportation limited to third-class surface vehicles—

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Ray checked the stream of information selected by Janet. *Seek possibility of using synthetic mesh on temporary laydown basis . . .* Ray was team coordinator, who assembled the facts selected by Janet, put them in shape toward solution of the problem.

Then it was Lynne's turn. In a way, save that all three of them were vital to team-success, she was top-dog. It was up to her to listen to Janet's stream of information, to follow Ray's assembly job, to say, "This will work," or, "This will not work," or perhaps, "This will work if we do such-and-such, rather than thus-and-so."

There weren't many who could fill this job of synthesizer without too-wide variance from the judgments of the machine itself. Consequently there weren't very many teams actually at work—perhaps a score, give or take a few, at any one time. Such synthesization demanded a quality almost akin to intuition—but intuition disciplined and controlled to give results as often as needed.

She concentrated now, though her head was troubling her again, keying her whole being to Janet, then to Ray. And to her horror she began to get a picture—not of the problem of using waste matter to abet highway construction in Assam without disrupting the climate-limited transportation of Patagonia, but of the thoughts and feelings of Janet Downes.

It was frightening to realize that she was reading everything Janet kept carefully concealed behind the sardonic mask of her personality. It was disturbing to discover how much she herself was resented and hated and feared by Janet. It was horrifying to learn how hungry was Janet, how she thirsted to smash Lynne's attachment to Ray, how she planned to use the problem of the headache to discredit Lynne, not only with Mother Weedon and the Mind-Authority but with Ray himself.

I must be going crazy, Lynne thought and became sickeningly aware that she had missed a query from Ray. She turned her attention toward him, found herself enmeshed in a confused jumble of thoughts in which Janet figured with shocking carnality, while she herself was fully clothed and placed on a pedestal resembling a huge and grotesquely ugly frog. *Why,* she thought, *Ray fears me—almost hates me!*

Once again she had lost the thread. Desperately she strove to catch up, found herself issuing an answer. *Suggest employment of sea-transport to solve problem.*

Where had that one come from? Lynne wondered. The ocean lanes had not been used for two-thirds of a century, save for fishing and excursions. But hundreds of the old double-hulled cataliners of the pre-atomic air-age were still in their huge cocoon-capsules in various nautical undertakers' parlors.

She watched the large indicator

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breathlessly, wondering what the machine would answer. Almost certainly a 1.3 variation—which would mean the problem would be shunted to another team. An 0.2 variation was considered normal. Lynne's decisions, over the eleven months of her assignment, had averaged 0.13. Her best mark had been an 0.08.

She caught a flash of Janet's thoughts . . . *lucky SSG so-and-so! She wasn't even paying attention!* Rigorously Lynne forced herself to concentrate on the large indicator. It flashed a warning blue, then yellow, then red—and then showed a round single 0!

It was, Lynne thought, impossible. No team had ever, in the entire history of human-cybernetic integration, produced an answer without a single variance with the machine. The best on record was an 0.056 by Yunakazi in East-Asia Center. And he had never come close to it again.

Lynne nodded to the rest of them and unfastened her collar. She felt a little sick to her stomach. An 0-variant answer was supposed to be impossible. But she had attained one, and at a time when her mind had been wandering, thanks not only to her malaise but because of her shocking telepathic experience. She wondered dully if the two factors were integrated in her incredible result.

". . . like the monkeys with fifty million typewriters composing a Shakespearean sonnet, probability ultimately favors it," Ray was saying. "Lynne, let's try another. What's the next problem, Jan?"

"Poor reaction of fifth age-group children in Honduras to gnomics during the months of July and August," Janet said promptly. "Wanted—its causes and cure."

Lynn listened in a sort of stupor. When she felt telepathic messages impinging upon her mind she forced them out. She only half-heard Janet's smooth assemblage of facts. Ray's coordination and selection of those most relevant. And then she thought quickly, *Climate change to 42 per-cent lower humidity, expense contained by use in schools only and segregation of children during crucial months.*

Again the flashes from the indicator—again the zero.

Janet regarded Lynne with odd speculation in her hazel eyes, Ray looked a little frightened. Lynne said, "I don't know what's going on but my head is killing me. I'm going home and rest."

"What about our date tonight?" Ray asked quickly—too quickly.

She studied him a long moment. She *did* love him, she *did* want to marry him, she *did* want to bear his children—or did she? She was going to have to face the problem squarely and do it soon. She said, "I guess you'd better give me a rain-check, honey."

She walked out the door with a vivid picture of what Janet was thinking. Janet was going to do her damnedest to take Ray away from

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her that night by the oldest and still the most effective weapon a woman could use. And if Lynne tried to make trouble about it she intended to make trouble for Lynne.

As for Ray—he didn't seem to have any thoughts at all. He was a sort of Thurber male, cowering in his corner while the dominant females fought over him. The only hitch, Lynne decided, was that there wasn't going to be any fight. Janet could have him . . . in spades!

She took the moving sidewalk back to Mother Weedon's. For almost a year the trim white dome with its curved polarized picture windows and pink Martian vines had represented home and shelter and a prized individuality after the group-existence of school dormitories.

Now it looked like half an egg of some menacing unearthly bird, half an egg into which she must crawl and hide, unsure of how long it would afford her shelter. Even Mother Weedon, a shrewd and kindly widow of sixty whose strength and good-humor made her the ideal team-matron, looked alien and oddly menacing.

She caught the older woman's thoughts as she entered the house. *What's happened to Lynne? Always thought that girl was too bottled up. She should have married Ray six months ago. He's not the sort of male even a girl as pretty as Lynne can keep on a string indefinitely—not with a harpy like Janet in the picture . . .*

Mechanically Lynne ran her fingers down the magnezipper of her blue plastifleece jacket, deposited it carefully against the magnetic hook on the wall of the entry. She felt a renewed weakness, a sickness that made her head throb more severely than ever. All the way back from the brain-station she had been seeking reassurance in the probability that her sudden telepathic ability was caused by some stimulation of the machine, would vanish when she broke contact with it.

Now she knew better—and her panic increased. She almost ran to the escalator so she wouldn't have to exchange chatter with Mother Weedon. She literally had to be alone.

II

Lynne stirred uneasily on her plastomat. She knew she was there, felt sure she was not asleep. Yet the dream persisted, holding her in a grip that was tighter than reality.

She was alone in a strange crystaline chamber, high, high up in a strange crystaline tower. Thanks to the fact there was no metal in its construction, nowhere was there rust. Yet her chamber, like the tower itself, showed definite signs of age and ruin.

An irregular segment of one wall had been penetrated by a missile of some sort and patched with plastic spray to keep out the thin, chill, unending wind. On lower levels,

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she knew, were larger scars of long-forgotten destruction. Just above the transparent arched ceiling what had been an elaborate tracery of gleaming flying buttresses, their functional purpose long since lost, stood precariously in a pattern of ruin.

Here and there about her, other surviving towers of the city rose in more serious stages of decay. And far below, on the windswept square, huddled the gleaming egg-shaped shelters of the Earthfolk. Beyond the city area the red desert and green oases stippled off to the dark horizon or advanced to invade the steep scarp of the far bank of the great canal.

Lynne was alone in a tower on Mars. Instruments, strange to her eyes but stamped with the familiar patterns of Earthly design and manufacture, lined three walls of the chamber. She knew she should take the downlift and return to the tiny cluster of Earth-dwellings in the court below, that her tour of duty was ended.

Yet she could not leave. Voices whispered within her head and tugged at her emotions, voices whose owners she could not see, whose embodiment lurked ever just beyond the range of her eyes, no matter how quickly she rolled them. Voices that begged for her assistance, offering unheard-of pleasures as a reward, unthought-of torments as punishment for her refusal to cooperate.

They were strange voices, whose message bore the corrupt cynicism of the very old, coupled with the naïve enjoyments of long deferred second childhood—alien voices. Or were they alien? Wasn't it rather that *she* was the alien, like those other Earthfolk who lived in the cluster of pathetic little huts below, who strove to reclaim the too-lean atmosphere of a planet, most of which had long-since escaped into the star-studded black-velvet backdrop of space.

Yes, it was *she* who was alien. And with the thought came another, a *human* picture, so horrible, so gruesome, that her mind refused to accept it. Yet she knew it was vitally important she see it clearly. But the others, the invisibles, kept derailing her concentration with their whispers of joys unknown before to mortal man or woman, their soft threats of torments beyond those conceived by Dante himself.

"Let us in," they offered softly, with the mischief of the very old. "Let us in and we shall romp and travel and find new uses for your bodies. We shall live side by side within you and lead you to pleasures no souls contained by bodies can ever know. We shall . . ."

There was something Lynne should ask them, an answer to their Saturnalian bribery—but like their visibility it refused to rise to the upper level of her consciousness. She felt sudden shame at not being able to speak, fear at her inability to marshal needed thoughts, fear

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that grew quickly into terror while the all-important question struggled vainly to make itself uttered.

Laughing like rollicking imps, the whisperers closed in a hemisphere about and above her, dancing in weird joyous malicious rhythm and bottling up reason as effectively as a plastivial. All at once she found herself holding her head and screaming at them to go away . . .

Lynne woke up. She discovered herself already sitting erect on the plastomat, supported by hands that dug into its pneumatic surface. She looked wildly around her, noted the familiar tri-di picture of Victoria Falls on the wall, the blank vidar-screen on its stand beside the magnicloset entry, the picwindow with its familiar vista of morning sunlight and greenery outside Mother Weedon's.

Only then did she become aware that her headache was worse. It seemed to grow with each successive morning. During the day it lapsed at times to mere vague discomfort, and with the aid of a couple of syntholaud pills she was able to sleep. But when she awoke each following morning it seemed a trifle worse.

She stepped into the bathostall, which performed all functions of cleansing and elimination simultaneously, felt briefly better and got into sandals, clout and bolero, polarizing them to a gaudy scarlet, which clashed with her fair coloring but expressed her mood of defiance, not only at her own ailments but the personal treachery of Janet and the waverability of Ray Cornell.

Mother Weedon smiled approval of this gay gesture when Lynne took her place at the breakfast table. "I'm glad you're feeling better, Lynne," she said. "I've been worried about you lately."

"Really putting it on, aren't you, honey?" Janet asked with a trace of resentment. She had polarized her own costume to a soft pink, which was washed out by Lynne's bold color-scheme. Nor could she change it during the day without revealing her defeat.

"Delicious!" exclaimed Ray, ogling her with delight and pouring paprisal instead of sucral on his Helthplankton.

Lynne laughed as she hadn't laughed in days. She wondered why she felt so suddenly light-hearted and happy, especially after her waking nightmare. Then, suddenly, she realised she was utterly unaware of what the others were thinking. She was no longer telepathic. She was normal once more!

However, it required no telepathic powers to sense that Ray was in a sadly shattered state over whatever had happened between Janet and himself on their date the night before. Lynne surmised that her rival had enticed Ray into full courtship, that he was now suffering from remorse, revulsion and a resurgence of desire for herself.

She wondered why she didn't care, then realised that Janet was no longer her rival. Ray was a nice

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boy, a highly trained and talented boy—but she wasn't in love with him any more. There were, she thought, probably half a billion unattached males in the world at any given moment, many of them far more interesting and attractive than Ray Cornell. All she had to do was look for them . . .

Headache and nightmare receded further with each mouthful of breakfast she ate. Her appetite was back and she kidded brightly with a miserable Ray and a rather sullen and suspicious Janet all the way to the brain-station. And then things began to happen that shattered her new-found adjustment.

She was barred from entry to the studioff. The electroscreen admitted Ray and Janet as usual but remained an invisible wall that refused her admittance. She was no longer keyed to the group-machine. Before she could try again a magnovox said, "Please report to Integration Chief on Floor Eighty. Please report to Integration Chief on . . ."

Ray looked scared. Disruption of a team during working hours was an emotional shock. Even Janet showed traces of fright. But she managed a grin and said, "Give him the old treatment, Lynne, and you can't lose." She accompanied the remark with a thoroughly carnal bump.

Lynne said nothing, being incapable of speech. She turned and made her way to the mobilramp, had a sudden vivid recollection of the older but far more efficient lift on the Martian tower in her dream. She felt sick to her stomach and her headache was thumping again.

She had never been on the eightieth floor before—it was reserved for guiding geniuses, who had no time for mere group-machine members except in case of trouble. Lynne wondered what she had done as she entered a room with walls of soft rolling colors.

The man on the couch, a tall lean saturnine man with dark eyes that seemed to read right through her from out of a long lined white face, didn't leave her long in doubt. He said, "Miss Fenlay, I'm afraid I have bad news for you. As a result of your amazing performance yesterday your usefulness as a group-machine worker is ended."

"But I was right," she protested. "I had the first zero-variation in integration history."

"You needn't be so frightened," he said more gently. "I know this must be a severe emotional shock. You were right—by the machine. We need human factors in cybernetics to show us where the machines are wrong, not where they are right. To come up with two successive zero-variant answers implies some sort of rapport with the machine itself. We can't afford to take further chances."

Lynne sat down abruptly on an empty couch. She felt empty inside, said, "What am I to do?"

The tall dark man's smile was a trifle frosty. He said, "We've been

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watching you, of course. About all I can tell you, Miss Fenlay, is that your—er—aberration is not exactly a surprise."

"You mean you've been spying on me?" Even though Lynne was thoroughly conditioned to accept her life as part of a complex mechano-social integration, she found the idea of being spied upon unpleasant.

"Not really," he told her. "And don't worry. We have no intention of letting your remarkable gifts go to waste." He paused, added, "I hope your headache is better soon."

"Thank you," she said. She was outside before the full implications of his parting shot sank home. How had he or anyone known she was suffering from headache? She had reported it to no one—and the helth-check booth machine was not geared to give confidential evidence or to retain personality keys for checking.

It was a puzzle. She worked on it until she was almost back at Mother Weedon's, then realised the Integration Chief had given her no hint of a new assignment—had only suggested she was to be used. She began to wonder if laboratory test-animals suffered from headaches like the one which seemed to have led to her undoing.

There was no escaping Mother Weedon, who was enjoying a tridi vidarcast in full view of the front door as Lynne came in. Well, the girl thought, she was going to have to be told anyway—if she hadn't already got the news from the brain-station.

Evidently Mother Weedon had heard. She motioned the girl to sit beside her on her couch and said, "Don't worry, Lynne. You're going to be fine. The trouble with you is you've outgrown your job—yes, and Janet and Ray and me too. You can't help it. You're too good for us and that's that. They'll be moving you on."

"But I *like* it here," cried Lynne. "I like you and Jan and Ray and our work with the group-machine. I don't want it to change."

"But it will—e v e r y t h i n g changes," said Mother Weedon gently. "I'm glad you've been happy here. But your happiness has meant Janet's unhappiness and, more lately, Ray's."

"I—see," Lynne said slowly. She hadn't thought of things in that light before. But of course it was true. The first real home she had ever known was about to be taken from her and the experience was too personal to allow much detached thinking.

Like most genetically-controlled children whose double-birth had been successful, she had been brought up with functional rather than sentimental care. Not having known her parents, not having known her twin brother on Mars, she had never missed them. The teachers and matrons at the seminary had been carefully selected for their warmth and competence. There had always been plenty of

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playmates, plenty of interesting things to learn.

Living at Mother Weedon's had been a new and emotionally opening experience, as had the blossoming of her romance with Ray Cornell, her now-fractured friendship with Janet Downes. It was not going to be easy to leave, to tear up only recently established roots, to set down new ones which might in time be as ruthlessly sundered.

She felt frightened and very much alone, as if she were again in the Martian tower of her nightmare with only alien and disembodied voices speaking to her. Mars —she wondered a little about it. Somewhere on Mars was her twin, Revere Fenlay, the brother she could not remember. She wondered if he too were having troubles. There were stories floating about of twins whose rapport spanned lifetimes separated by the distance between the planets. But she knew nothing of Mars.

She watched a vidarcast with Mother Weedon, an unreal historical romance of love and adventure in one of the vast sprawling industrial empires of the mid-twentieth century. There was, for twenty-second-century folk, a vast emotional appeal in the job-competition, the hard compulsory physical toil, the dangers of that exciting era. But Lynne was too wrapped up in her own problem to react as usual.

While she and Mother Weedon were lunching on pineapple soup and Bermudasteak with shadbacon and lacticola, Ray and Janet came in. They pretended concern at what had happened to Lynne and the team but were obviously excited with one another and the prospect of integrating a new member of the team in Lynne's place.

After the meal Janet and Lynne were briefly alone in the vida-room. Janet eyed Lynne covertly and Lynne said, "It's all right, Jan. I'm not going to put up a fight for Ray. Under the circumstances it's only fair. I don't know what's going to happen to me and you and him—"

"Damn you, Lynne Fenlay!" Janet's sudden flare of hot emotion was almost frightening. "You *would* be like this. Don't you realise that by being noble you'll leave both of us with a guilt complex we'll never be able to shake?"

"Sorry," said Lynne sincerely. "I can't help it."

Janet regarded her narrowly, shook her head. "Hasn't anything ever touched you, Lynne?" she asked. "Haven't you ever wanted Ray or anyone as I want him? Haven't you ever hated anyone as I'm beginning to hate you? Haven't you ever been human?"

"*Jan!*" Lynne was shocked, then vaguely frightened. "I don't know —I guess maybe not," she said. "But Jan, I can't help it. That's the way I am."

Janet sighed and said, "In that case I'm sorry for you." She changed the subject quickly as Ray came wandering in, gave Lynne an unhappy look, then crossed the

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room and turned on the vidar-screen. Peace of an uneasy sort reigned for the next hour.

"When are they assigning your new member?" Lynne asked as the picture, a documentary about solar heat, came to an end.

"Not for a day or so," said Ray. He looked at her piteously. "We—we're going to miss you, Lynne. I wish I understood . . ."

"You're going to be too busy," Lynn told him. "And don't worry about me, Ray. I've already talked to Jan."

"You mean you're not angry about *us?*"

Lynne shook her head, glanced at Janet, was again startled by the blazing hatred that was beamed her way. She wondered what it must feel like to hate in such thorough fashion. She was relieved when she heard Mother Weedon talking to someone at the door.

A moment later the widow entered and said, "This is Rolf Marcein, kids. He's going to be staying with us a little while." She introduced the three of them to the newcomer.

Lynne barely acknowledged the greeting. She was too startled. The most recent addition to Mother Weedon's charmed circle appeared, in the semi-dark room, to be the man who had given her her walking papers that morning on the eightieth floor of the brain-station tower.

He was tall, dark, lanky, saturnine. His name was Marcein. At least that was something Lynne hadn't known before. And then she noticed that this Marcein's face was not so pale, that his eyes were brighter, his manner and movements more athletically poised than the man on the eightieth floor. Mother Weedon pressed the polarizer to let more light into the room, since the vidarbox was not on. The stranger's tan, seen in the light, was startling, especially to Lynne, who had seen his pale double so recently.

His double—that meant his twin, she thought. And if his twin worked in the brain-station, then *this* man must be a Martian. Certainly that would account for his tan, caused by living under the thin atmosphere of the red planet—as it would account for an athletic poise acquired during the hardships of Martian existence.

You're right, of course. I am Dolf's twin and I am from Mars.

It took her almost a full second to realise the thoughts had not been spoken. She was telepathic again, aware not only of the newcomer's thoughts but of those of the others in the room—though not as much aware of theirs as of Rolf Marcein's.

She looked at him with something like panic, saw his brilliant dark eyes upon her, noted that he wore his clothes well, that there was something almost lupine in his grace, something almost overpowering . . .

You must know you're beautiful yourself, Lynne Fenlay—if soft and

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unawakened. I have an idea I could turn the trick . . .

It was like a blow. Not only could she read *his* thoughts, Lynne realised—but he could read *hers.* She felt her face flame and a sudden surge of resentment toward his arrogance that forced her to leave the room lest she reveal the weakness it caused. And as she left his soft laughter rang like hailstones in her ears.

III

The days that followed Rolf Marcein's arrival at Mother Weedon's became, to Lynne, a period of waiting. It was a period of waiting games as well. No summons came from the eightieth floor of the brain-station to give her a clue as to the nature of her next assignment. For the first time in her life she found herself hung in a vacuum with nothing definite to do or to look forward to.

Naturally she wondered whether Rolf Marcein might not be the answer to this facet of her problem. But not even her growing telepathic abilities could pry a response out of his mind. He seemed to be visiting the home planet on the vaguest sort of business—something to do with development and transport of specially-bred plant and animal stock for the red planet.

It seemed absurd on the face of it that such an obviously able adjustee should be returned to Earth on such a mission, especially with every gram of interplanetary shipspace at a premium. Yet either it was truth or Rolf had developed some method of screening his thoughts against telepathic probing—a frightening idea in itself.

He hung around Mother Weedon's most of the time. As a result Lynne saw a lot of him throughout the days and evenings, a fact which both pleased and alarmed her unreasonably. It was during the third night of his stay that he invaded, or tried to invade, her nights as well.

Before drifting off to sleep she found herself dwelling on him with relaxed reverie. Ray and Janet had had some sort of quarrel and the atmosphere that evening had been far from pleasant. It was a relief to lie alone, to let her thoughts roam and quest as they would.

Rolf had talked of Mars during a stroll to the bazaar-mart during the afternoon. He had described a boar-hunt on Earth's sister-planet during a night when both Deimos and Phobos were describing their rapid orbits across the cloudless sky.

The pig, as man's most adaptable food-animal, had been the first livestock imported to Mars less than three decades earlier. Now, according to Rolf, the animals had in large measure reverted to their feral state and constituted a menace to man and his works alike.

"We used flashlights and small-arms paralyzers on that hunt," Rolf said. "We flushed a whole herd of them in an erosion-gully along the border of the Great Southern Canal

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—didn't get so much as a smell of the brutes until we were right on top of them.

"At that we managed to nab a baker's dozen for de-tusking and redomestication. *Ferkab,* it was touch and go for a bit! One big brute slipped under my ray and if I hadn't been lucky enough to jam my flashlight tube into his mouth he'd have taken my leg off."

"What does *ferkab* mean?" Lynne asked, a little annoyed at feeling an atavistic thrill from the account of the primitive hunt.

To her delight Rolf actually blushed beneath his tan. He began with, "I don't think you'd appreciate its meaning," then recalled her telepathic powers and shut up and blushed more deeply.

At which it had been Lynne's turn to feel her face grow hot. The meaning of *ferkab,* an approximate translation of certain graphically illustrated ancient Martian runes, was explicit to the point of bawdiness. Yet on Mars, apparently, it was used in mixed company.

So, lying half asleep, Lynne not surprisingly visualised the boar hunt as Rolf had described it. She could see his weatherproof aluminum clothing gleaming in the pale light of the swift tiny moons, shining in the occasional ray of a flashlight as he and his shadowy companions worked their way along the eroded bank of the canal.

Then the sudden rustle and thump and grunting of the beasts as they came charging out of their threatened shelter, their vast menacing shapes with huge tusks and little red eyes glittering in the confused crisscross of flashlight rays. She saw the paralyzers' brief glow, heard the thud of falling animal bodies, saw the sudden rush of one furious beast inside the protective sweep of Rolf's hand-weapon, saw his quick graceful evasive movement, heard the champ of savage tusks crushing the hard alloy of the metal tube.

Once, on the vidarscreen, she had watched a toreador do his dance of death with a furious bull, in an historical show. Rolf, she thought, was slim as a toreador, slim and graceful and equally accustomed to facing danger and death as an accepted part of life.

Then, she told herself scornfully, she was reverting to the primitive as if she were a Martian sow herself. She thought of the word *ferkab* and what it meant and felt her face grow hot in the darkness. For she could visualise Rolf and—herself—in a way she had never been able to think of herself with Ray Cornell.

It's not confined to Mars, darling, came the sudden probe of Rolf's thought over hers. *But it takes a Martian to be the best.*

Reverie was obliterated by rage. She sent back a string of thoughts that should have blistered Rolf's brains—if he had any decency. He withdrew before her counterattack and she wondered if he really did

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have any decency—or if her rage were all she had pretended.

She was cool to him the next day—and the arrival of the new member of the group-machine gave her opportunity to avoid him. Her replacement was a dark stocky quiet young man named Alan Waters and he seemed quite smitten with her—a fact which made Janet visibly jealous. Lynne found herself quite enjoying her triumph.

But the day after, when the other three reported for work at the brain-station and Mother Weedon visited the bazaar-mart for some needed household supplies, Lynne found herself looking at a mischievously contrite Rolf across the breakfast table.

He said, "I'm sorry if I've offended you, Lynne. Apparently I made the mistake of thinking you had blood in your veins."

Lynne acted without volition for the first time since early babyhood. She picked up the plastisaucer in front of her and flung it across the neoplast tabletop at him. He ducked and for a moment his dark eyes blazed with laughter and then he sensed her distress and helped her with the atocleaner.

She tried to apologize but the words refused to come. And he never mentioned the incident afterward. Instead he took her for a walk through the park and talked to her of the more feral beauties of his own planet. "It's far wilder than this," he told her, gesturing at the neat clusters of trees and flowers, the perfectly clipped hedges about them. "Wilder and deadlier and far more beautiful."

"This is perfection," she told him.

"And perfection is death," was his reply.

"I thought Mars pretty much a dead planet," she said.

"It's a vast mausoleum," he said, his eyes lighting. "A mausoleum visited by new life, a mausoleum in which the very souls of the dead themselves seem beginning to stir. It's raw new life burgeoning on the old."

He talked on and she felt the beginnings of small responses stir within her and frighten her. For she had been conditioned to Earth and to wish for Mars was wrong. Finally he stopped and faced her and captured both her hands in his incredibly strong ones.

"Lynne," he said. "I haven't much longer here. I want to take you back home with me. Will you come?"

"Home—on *Mars?*" she countered. The idea was impossible. Yet, somewhere within herself, she wanted to go. Then the reasons, the millions of reasons why she couldn't say yes, came flooding up within her. Surely Rolf knew them—or did he?

"You know the system and the reasons behind it," she reminded him. "You have a twin right here in the city. I've talked to him—it was he who gave me my walking papers from the group-machine."

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"He told me," said Rolf quietly. "He told me a lot about you. Enough so I wanted to see you and get to know you. Now that I do know you I want you to go back with me. Can't you see, darling? There's little use for telepaths on Earth. On Mars we need them desperately. I think I can arrange a transfer."

"But my brother is already there," she told him a little desperately. "I—we—they can't leave two of us on one planet. And what right have I to ask him to come to Earth? He's not conditioned."

"But maybe he'd like to come back," Rolf suggested. "Maybe he's not happy on Mars."

"It's not just that," she said miserably. Nor was it. For the first time the entire system by which the Mars project was functioning seemed to her vastly unfair. Until that moment she had accepted it, considered it as immutable as the need for the sun itself.

The Earth Government, which was what the U.N. had evolved into after its first tortured half-century of birth, was determined not to repeat upon alien planets the mistakes of imperialism and colonization that had caused the home planet all but to tear itself to pieces during the twentieth century.

No convicts, no misfits, no refugee cultists were to be sent out to settle the newly-opened red planet—instead, the cream of Earth's best trained, most gifted and strongest young men and women were to do the preliminary settling. For it would still be many years before the arid world would be able to support much humanity.

There had been protests—chief among them a group of eugenicists who felt that loss of such a large group of qualified young folk would cost the home planet more genetically and socially than it could afford. The answer had been genetically-induced twins on the part of parents qualified to pass a wide variety of mental, physical and psychiatric tests, open to all who wished to join the project.

One of each set of such induced identical twins was early selected to go to Mars, the other to remain on Earth. Thus Earth lost nothing, yet had its potential Martians, ready for conditioning and training in special seminaries for lifetime work on the red planet. When one of a pair of twins was a girl, the other a boy, the boy was the one sent out—since life on Mars was still a rugged affair. Thus it was that Lynne had been reared for an Earth-career while her brother, Revere, had been educated and coached for a Mars-life.

Lynne's entire twenty-four years had been passed for the purpose of integration into and work for the improvement of humanity on her native planet. The very idea of Mars was terrifying, as was the idea of traveling there through space. She simply *couldn't* endure the

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wrench of the trip, the separation from all that mattered.

Rolf stood there quietly, letting her thoughts flow without interruption. Then he said, "I see—but it's not as bad as all that, darling. After all, *I* made the trip in reverse."

"But that's different—you're a man!" she protested.

"Nor is being a man as bad as you seem to think," he said and she sensed that he was teasing her and was grateful for the change in mood. Before she realized what she was doing she called him mentally a thoroughly bawdy Martian word.

"Where did you learn that?" he asked, startled.

"Where do you think?" she countered—and enjoyed seeing him blush again. They had a pleasantly innocuous time together the remainder of that day and evening.

The following morning Lynne awoke from another horrible nightmare of alien worlds to find her headache back in full force. So bad was it, in fact, that after making a half-hearted effort to get up she fell back on her plastomat, actually moaning a little. She felt as if she were undergoing some long-forgotten sort of Inquisition torture.

Rolf walked into her room within the hour and so sick was Lynne that she didn't even protest his presence. He said, "Lynne, darling, you've got to get over this. Believe it or not you're killing me."

"Then stay in your own mind." She managed a whisper of a smile.

"You're like a bad tooth," he said inelegantly. "You know it's going to hurt if you touch it but you can't stop running your tongue over it."

"Oh, shut up," she said rudely. "So now I'm an ulcerated tooth. I've never had one so I wouldn't know."

"Nor have I," he replied promptly. "But I've read about them. Come on. I'm going to take you to Centromed and get you fixed up."

"I'm too ill to move," she quavered, alarmed at the prospect.

But he simply moved in and took over, virtually forcing Lynne firmly but gently into her clothes, getting her downstairs and onto a moving strip, escorting her through the prophylactic entrance of the huge vertical cross of the Centromed, giving her in charge of a stern-faced but kindly physician in white, who put her in turn in the hands of a giant red-headed nurse in steropants and white cap.

Lynne never did find out what they did with her. She recalled lying down and looking up at a hypnotic ceiling, drifting quickly into merciful unconsciousness. When she recovered her headache was gone and she had a sense of having undergone an important experience.

"Miss Fenlay," the doctor said, "you're undergoing a period of mental growth and change that in your case seems to make such suffering periodic."

"What can I do about it?" she asked in panic.

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"I believe your trouble is one of environment," he replied. "During this period of readjustment you find familiar surroundings unsufferable. In plain English, you need a change."

"But how am I to get it?" she asked.

"That is hardly our department," he told her. "You'll have to take it up with your Integration Chief, I'm afraid. Naturally we'll be glad to make a recommendation for transfer on medical grounds."

"Thanks—thanks a lot," she said uncertainly. She walked out of the building and discovered it was already late afternoon. Unsureness chewed at her for the first time in her well-ordered life. The headache was gone but it might return if she didn't make a change—and she didn't want to leave the only home she'd ever known.

Rolf rose from an alloybanc on which he had been sitting and said, "Headache gone, Lynne? You look upset."

"Headache's gone," she replied. "But it may come back."

"Not if I can help it," he told her and she took his arm in hers and squeezed it to show her appreciation. Rolf might be a barbarian, she thought, but he *had* been kind and helpful.

"Thanks for the crumb anyway," he told her and her confusion grew almost to tears. They rode back to Mother Weedon's in silence.

Because of her fear at finding herself becoming so dependent on Rolf she flirted outrageously with Alan Waters, the team replacement, after dinner. When he followed her out into the garden and told her he was madly in love with her she didn't exactly discourage him. Just then her soul and body alike craved appreciation.

A furious Ray Cornell interrupted their third kiss. He strode through a gap in the hedge-wall and pulled Waters from her roughly and said, "They *told* me I'd find you two out here."

"What right have you to interfere?" countered Waters.

"*This!*" snapped Ray, throwing a clumsy punch at his rival, who threw one back in return.

Lynne let out a gasp of alarm and tried to move between them but was brushed rudely to the ground. So hard did she land that for a moment the world seemed to swim.

She shook her head to clear it, felt the alarm gongs she had come to know preceded a return of her headache. Then she saw a third taller male figure take Ray in one hand, Alan in the other and pull them apart by the collars of their bolo packets as if they were a couple of dogs squabbling over a bone.

"You men are supposed to work together," he said quietly. Then, his voice rising a half-tone and increasing in force, "Why in *farb* don't you?" With which he cracked their heads together with stunning force, tossed them to the turf like

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a pair of sacks and came over to help Lynne gently to her feet. She collapsed into his arms, for the first time let his lips seek hers, responded to them.

Later—how much later she didn't know, for during that day and evening she seemed destined to lose large chunks of time—she looked up at him, reveling in his controlled strength and leanness.

"Rolf," she said, "I'm sorry—that was my fault."

"You'd have been less than a woman if you hadn't done something like it to put me in my place," he whispered.

"But it seems so cheap now," she said. "And my head . . ."

"It wasn't cheap because you didn't know," he told her. "As for your head, you need a change. You're going to get one. You're leaving with me for Mars tonight."

"But, Rolf—" she began.

"Come on, honey," he told her. "It's all arranged. We've only got a couple of hours to make the ship."

She walked back to Mother Weedon's with his arm around her, stumbling a little from time to time like a blind woman. She was going to Mars and the mere idea scared her almost to death.

IV

Lynne, who had been largely brought up on stories of pioneer space-flights in which the passengers had to endure tremendous initial acceleration, was pleasantly surprised by the takeoff. She probably would have known better had her conditioning and training not geared her to such complete uninterest in anything beyond the atmosphere that she seldom thought of the stars except as pretty lights in the sky.

She did have to strap herself to her bunk before the immense silver teardrop rose slowly upward toward space—but as the stewardess explained in routine tones the strap was a mere precaution against a possible lurch caused by brief failure of one of the launching jets. And within five minutes after takeoff a tiny sign lit up over the cabin door that read UNFASTEN BELTS—SMOKING PERMITTED.

She sat up and loosened the strap and swung her feet to the deck, noted her roommate was doing likewise. In the turmoil of catching the Mars-ship Lynne had had little time to notice her. She managed to recall that her name was Joanna-something and that she was an expert in animal husbandry. She was a handsome immense South African girl whose dark complexion wore traces of both Caucasian and Oriental, as well as Hamitic ancestry. She offered Lynne one of the new skinless cigarettes.

"You on Integration business?" she asked.

Lynne, who knew nothing of affairs on Mars, probed quickly and discovered what the girl had in mind was a coordination trip by an Earth Government executive. She shook her head, said, "No, I'm

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going for good. I understand there's a job there for me."

The African girl regarded her curiously, then said, "I don't want to sound rude but aren't you a bit old to be going home?"

"I guess maybe I am." Looking more closely at her cellmate Lynne saw that for all her evident maturity she was still a girl in her late-middle teens. "They came after me."

As the girl nodded uncomprehendingly Lynne wondered if what she had uttered as a polite brush-off lie might not be the truth. There was a definite pattern of continuity to events following her first headache and her non-variant answers at the brain-station.

"Let's go to the saloon and see the stars," Joanna suggested.

It seemed like a good idea—besides, Lynne wanted to talk to Rolf, to discover if there actually *was* considered motive behind her apparently aimless emigration to the red planet.

She said, "How long does this trip take anyway?"

Joanna's jaw dropped and her black-satin hair gleamed with liquid highlights as she shook her head. "*Crebut*, you are green!" she exclaimed. Then, assuming sociability with an effort, "You're mighty pretty though. The trip takes a little more than one Earth-day."

"Thanks—I see," replied Lynne. She felt she was beginning to see a lot of things. Along with her archaic ideas about the rigors of a space-ship takeoff, she had apparently retained some mighty obsolete theories about the speed of space-travel, at least on the Earth-Mars run. In her mind it was a matter of weeks if not months, depending upon the relative positions of the two planets.

A little over one Earth-day—if her growing feeling that she was the victim or core of some vast unseen conspiracy were correct, then there would have been plenty of time for Rolf to be summoned from Mars after her non-variant answers had given the brain-station bosses the clue to her newly-developed telepathic powers.

But why all the secrecy? It didn't take her long to find an answer. Had she been asked immediately to come to Mars she would have refused point-blank to make the trip. Her conditioning, her whole life would have forced her to reply in the negative.

So Rolf Marcein had been sent for with orders to make her want to leave Earth with him, by fair means or foul. And he had not hesitated to employ the foul. She felt her whole body blush as she recalled some of the brazen suggestions he had made, some of her responses, especially to his embraces earlier that evening.

It was going to be a very interesting session, she decided, as she followed the girl into the single small but beautifully compact central lounge or saloon that space requirements permitted on the

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Mars-ship. She looked around but failed to see his tall figure and saturnine face—treacherous face, she thought—among the half-dozen passengers already reclining in plastolounges, watching the amazing panorama projected on the ceiling from the viewplate recorders in the prow and stern of the huge space-vessel.

She followed Joanna to a chair, tried to share the girl's tremulous excitement. After all, she thought, she had felt much the same on emerging from the seminary to take her first position as a data-recording supplement for the biggest of all cybernetics machines, the "brain" that occupied six thousand acres of the Sahara Desert.

"Look!" the girl whispered enthusiastically. "There's X-Three, the last of the derelict space-stations."

Lynne watched the oddly complex structure, that resembled a pair of unrooted pyramids fastened point to point, as it revolved slowly across and out of the plane of vision.

"What do they use it for now, Joanna?" she murmured.

"Nothing," the girl said with a trace of scorn.

Lynne knew she should have known about that. She recalled now a vidar newscast in which the abandonment of the last of the space-stations had been mentioned. In the years before A-engines were finally perfected space-stations were vitally necessary as change-over stops for interplanetary rocket flights. But once fuel ceased to be a problem they had been used merely as meteor-warning points and weather stations.

In the first function they had proved useless—in fact one of them had been destroyed by a large space-missile—and weather forecasting and control were practised far more efficiently by electronic mastery of the Heaviside Layer. Lynne shouldn't have forgotten—but when she heard it the matter of space-stations had been utterly unimportant in her life.

A steward in space-black bolo and clout offered them vari-flavored colafizzes from a rack strapped about his waist. Lynne wondered at this mode of serving the drinks while she sipped hers but decided not to ask Joanna. She didn't want to appear a total numbskull to a girl whose whole life had consisted of conditioning for Mars.

She found out soon enough when Rolf Marcein walked into the saloon before she had finished sipping her drink. She rose to greet him, to haul him off somewhere so they could talk alone—and as she did so she automatically dropped her colafizz in the receptacle ready to receive it in one arm of her plastolounge.

Joanna made a grab for it as it bounced off and rose lazily in the air and turned slowly over. The African girl caught it before it released any of the liquid remaining in it, pushed it firmly down into

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the hollow space reserved for it, where it was magnetically held.

But Lynne was not paying much attention. She was having enough trouble holding herself upright as her feet displayed an astonishing reluctance to keep on the floor while the rest of her wanted to describe a lazy parabola across the saloon. She did an off-to-Buffalo and wound up against Rolf's chest with his arms about her.

Embarrassed she whispered fiercely, "Put me down, you *marlet!*"

He grinned at her infuriatingly, replied, "I'm no *marlet*—that's a very nasty word on Mars and most of these people understand it. Don't you know you're in space?"

He set her gently back on her feet, holding her steady with one hand gripping an upper arm. She knew she looked like an idiot, left certain everyone in the saloon was laughing at her. "I thought they had artificial gravity on these ships," she said.

"They do," he told her. "But it's nothing like Earth-gravity. It would use up all power if it were. You'll learn to navigate. Come on, I'll show you how." He led her unprotesting into one of the corridors outside the saloon.

She pulled herself free, promptly smacked her head none too gently against the corridor wall. "I don't want a lesson now," she told him angrily. "Besides, why aren't I sick?"

"You would be," he informed her with what she interpreted as a smug expression, "if you hadn't been given your full quota of shots in the Centromed this afternoon. You don't think they'd have allowed you aboard otherwise, do you?"

"You had it all figured out, didn't you?" she snapped at him angrily. "I'll give odds you even said something to Alan and Ray tonight that got them involved in that horrible brawl!"

"It was nothing," he said with false modesty, flicking a nonexistent speck of dust from a bare forearm. "Just a bit of premeditated Machiavelli. Anyone could have managed it."

"What are you trying to do to me?" she asked him desperately. "I'll even bet my headaches were induced. Why pick on *me*? I don't want to go to Mars—I never wanted to go there."

"Maybe because I'm in love with you," he said simply.

She ignored the intensity of his dark eyes, said, "You're not in love with me. You didn't come to Earth until that twin of yours at the brain-station sent you a message I was telepathic. You've only made love to me to get me to Mars—for some selfish purpose of your own. Try and deny it."

"In view of your current mood," he replied quietly, "I'd be seven kinds of a sand-*lurtonk* to try. You seem to have things all figured out yourself. Very well, it's your privilege to look at my actions any way

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you choose. But my purpose is not selfish!"

Something in the ring of his voice, in the determined set of his lower face, told her he was speaking the truth. She said, "All right, what purpose gives you the right to come to Earth, to violate everything I cherish, to make me a voluntary kidnapee, to wreck my life and drag me off to a planet I haven't even been trained for? What's to prevent me from reporting it and having you arrested?"

"Nothing," he replied, "except that I'd probably be released as soon as we reached Mars. If you still feel like this when we get there tomorrow I shan't stand in the way of your returning." There was a new sag in his shoulders, a weariness to the lines about his mouth.

"Oh, great!" she retorted. "Smash my job, my personal life, then say you won't try to stop me from going back to it. How *can* you go around with so few ethics? What sort of person are you anyway?"

"A very serious one—a very worried one," he told her quietly and her quick probe of his thoughts revealed him again to be speaking the truth. He captured both her arms again, held her gently against the wall, and so great was the hypnotic force of his personality that despite her anger toward him she made no move to break away.

"You have a right to know—*now*," he told her. "I'm a Martian, a third generation one, even though I was born and trained on Earth. Conditions out there are only just beginning to be fit for human infants. We're building the biggest thing Man has ever accomplished on Mars—making a barren ruined planet live again, making it fit for men and women and babies to inhabit.

"Right now we're up against the greatest danger we've faced since the first few desperate years—maybe an even greater threat. We can't see it, we don't even know what it is. But men and women on Mars are going mad. Only a few of us can reach them—and thanks to a condition of the planet we're all too overloaded to do the psychiatric work we should do. We need telepaths."

A flash of something she had heard or read somewhere about the red planet occurred to her. She said, "But doesn't the atmosphere or something of Mars encourage telepaths? *You're* one. Why come to Earth for them? Why pick on me?"

"Because," he told her with the patience of exasperation, "we need at least to maintain those telepaths we have—which aren't nearly enough. You don't seem to realise that a genuine two-way telepath, even among fourth generation Martians, occurs only about once in eleven thousand six hundred births. And we need more than the few we have for communications alone."

"Communications!" Lynne was honestly shocked. "Do you mean to tell me that Mars has no—"

"No form of lateral electronic

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communications functions reliably on Mars," he told her bluntly as if admitting a fact he hated to mention about the planet he loved. "Don't ask me why—it's just so, that's all. *Crehut*, do you think our best scientific brains haven't tried? They believe the thinness of the atmosphere and the resulting weakness of the Martian Heaviside Layer has something to do with it. We get messages from Earth and the other planet-stations clearly and, with the ato-reduced time lag, in a matter of seconds."

"And you have to use telepaths to transmit and receive?" She was almost incredulous but her mind informed her he was telling the truth without reserve.

"Whatever we can't heliograph or send over wire cables," he said unhappily. "And the climate of Mars is rough on cables. Above the ground the winds snap 'em. Underground they rot or the *czanworms* eat through them. Now do you begin to understand?"

"A—little," she replied hesitantly, unable to maintain her entirely justified anger against his sincere appeal. "But what about this threat—this madness? What is it?"

"We don't know." His face was shadowed. "There may still be life-forms on Mars of which we know nothing—or perhaps manifestations of those we thought safe that are dangerous. But something apart from atmosphere or weather or diet or drink is creating insanity. And it seems to be affecting our telepaths rather than others. Maybe our telepathic minds are more open to whatever the influence is. I don't know." His expression turned grim. "I've never allowed them—it—to affect *me*."

All at once she remembered the nightmare, the being alone in the crystal tower, the crowding in upon her of unseen things that whispered dreadful alluring suggestions, the sense of panic. She began to understand it with growing certainty.

Lynne said, "My brother—Revere—he's one of those who's been affected, isn't he?"

He hesitated, evidently felt the probe of her questing brain, nodded reluctantly. He said, "Your brother is one of them. The *purt* of it is we don't dare send him back to Earth."

"I understand." She shuddered, felt a reassuring hand on her shoulder, added, "He's mad, isn't he." It was statement, not query.

"I'm afraid so—at least part of the time," he replied. "But don't worry. We have marvelous clinics on Mars. Once we get him to one of them there's a good chance of a cure."

"You mean he isn't getting care now?" she asked, shocked.

Rolf shook his head, replied, his voice low, "Not yet—not until you replace him. That's how short-handed we are. We've lost too many the last few months. And there simply aren't any replacements. That's why I rushed to Earth when I heard about you, why perhaps I

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used unscrupulous methods to get you to come. There are less than a million people on all of Mars."

She understood his unspoken analogy. Less than a million people —less than a hundred telepaths, to maintain communications over the entire planet. Then she thought of something else, said, "My headaches —they're telepathic, aren't they? Caused when my brother has one of his attacks?"

"That's right as nearly as we can judge," he told her. "You seem to have an intense sympathetic affinity. It's not unusual between identical telepaths."

"And there aren't many of those," she said idly. She looked at him. "How about your brother, Rolf. Isn't he . . . ?"

"Unfortunately not," he replied. "He has some tendency toward E.S.P. but insufficiently strong to be reliable."

Lynne sensed his thoughts shifting to his brother, then to hers—and was astounded by the depth of dislike he suddenly projected. It came as another shock and she said, "You hate my brother, don't you, Rolf? If you didn't you'd have managed to get him the care he must have to survive."

"I don't hate your brother," he said wearily and she realised he spoke the truth. What he felt for Revere Fenley was the rather arrogant dislike and distrust toward a weaker man that is so frequent among the strong. Lynne resented it, resented him, bitterly.

She said, "Then why haven't *you* replaced him? You're a telepath—why haven't *you* given him relief?"

Again he looked defeated and, with feminine illogic, her heart went out to him. He said, "I wish I could—unfortunately I'm not permitted to go out in the field alone."

Annoyed by her heart's betrayal she let herself think, *Ah, an arm-lounge admiral, a user of men who saves his own skin!* She watched anger wash defeat from his face, for a moment felt fear at its intensity. Then, without a word, he turned and left her alone in the corridor.

She felt a cheap victor as with difficulty she made her way back to her cabin. Nor was her self-esteem lifted when Joanna, sitting up in her bunk, said, "You must be real *zwirch*, Fenlay, if Marcein came for you. He's Communications Integrator for the whole ruddy planet —a real big bomb. How about introducing me before we land?"

V

To her considerable surprise in view of her emotionally upset condition, Lynne slept like the proverbial top. It took the combined efforts of Joanna and the stewardess to get her awake and up and dressed in time for the landing outside of New Samarkand. After a momentary breathless hovering pause the big ship set itself down so gently there was a hardly perceptible jar as it touched ground.

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Feeling cumbrous in cold-resistent parkaed coverall and curiously alone despite the cluster of passengers that waited with her in the airlock foyer, Lynne looked about her for Rolf Marcein. She felt a certain residue of guilt for her treatment of him during their last session, despite the justification of her anger. Here, on the threshold of an alien planet—*his* planet—she needed him.

He might have betrayed her and her brother, kidnapped her, all but seduced her—yet he was the sole human being she knew here. Her eyes sought him desperately, finally saw him working his way through the waiting passengers toward her.

He thrust an oddly-shaped little packet toward her, said, "Here—fasten it on. It's an oxyrespirator—you'll need it. Use it whenever you feel faint."

His manner was gravely polite and his thoughts were carefully masked. He hadn't, she decided, forgiven her for that *armlounge admiral* insult of the night before. She sent her apologies mentally, received only a curt acknowledgement. She began to feel miserable.

Then, abruptly, the port was opened. With his arm steadying her Lynne stepped out onto the escaramp platform, a couple of hundred meters above the flat blast-scarred surface of the field. A thin chill wind cut her face, a wind from out of a sky darker than that of Earth.

Her first reaction was of gauntness, of barrenness beyond anything she had known on her home planet. The grounds around the Sahara brain-center in which she had served her apprenticeship had been lush with tropical growths—and even the desert around them had been warm. But the vast reddish expense of the spaceport looked cold and uninviting—even the row of oddly shaped metal buildings at its edge had a shabby eroded untended appearance.

Her second reaction, as she rode the ramp down was of breathlessness. The icy air stung the insides of her nostrils, as it did her face, but failed to fill her lungs. Panic swept over her and she clutched at her breast. Then Rolf's arms were around her from behind, his long strong fingers were adjusting the oxyrespirator.

Lynne breathed deeply and felt a sudden surge of exhilaration. No wonder, she thought irrelevantly, the Martians were more volatile than Earthfolk. They must be constantly high on oxygen. She suppressed an impulse to giggle as she reached the bottom of the moving ramp.

Her third reaction, as she took her first step on Mars, was of weightlessness. Not the unhealthy weightlessness of the space-ship but a buoyancy comparable to that of swimming in the Great Salt Lake or the Dead Sea. Lynne sat rigidly on an urge to discover how high and far she could jump, even encumbered by the aluminum coverall. She realised her hair was blowing in

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the wind, pulled the parka over it.

"You'll do." Rolf looked her over disinterestedly, added, "Unless you still want to go back to Earth."

It must have been the oxygen that made her reply, "What for? Now that I'm here I might as well give it a run." Irresponsible or not, it was worth it to see the softness that came into his dark eyes.

He took her arm and said gruffly, "Come on. We've got things to do. I'm turning you over to Tony Willis. He'll brief you. He promised to be here . . . There he is, by the Administration Building."

There was no doubt about the warmth of Tony Willis' greeting—outwardly or telepathically. He gave Rolf a bearhug, then turned quickly to Lynne, pumped her right hand, said, "*Crebut*, I'm glad you got here! But Rolf didn't warn us he was bringing a tearing beauty."

"Tearing mad most of the way," she said, unable to remain unresponsive to Willis' warmth. He was a tubby bespectacled young man with an irresistible grin. From him she felt no probe of her thoughts, knew sudden overwhelming relief. Despite Rolf's assurance that there were fewer than a hundred telepaths on Mars, subconsciously she had been expecting to land on a planet where her innermost thoughts were open to everyone. She was almost pathetically grateful that it was not so.

"Old Rolf must be losing his touch," said Willis, grinning. "He's our ace-in-the-hole when it comes to—personal management. Has a thousand lovely ladies eating right out of his hand."

"Shut up, you *czanworm!*" Rolf's thoughts revealed acute distress and Lynne felt a little glow of triumph.

She said, "Well, one way or another he got me here."

"And do we need you!" Willis led the way toward a pharmabar.

"Thank you, sir." Lynne turned on the charm, enjoying the inner growls of resentment from Rolf. Well, he'd played a game with her, she thought. He had no right to resent her playing a few herself.

But I wasn't playing for fun! The message was sharp and resentful. *I was playing for the safety of my planet.*

You mean one little girl like me can save a great big world like this? It must be the oxygen, she decided, that was making her behave so giddily. Or perhaps she couldn't help tormenting him a little—a very little.

"Hey, cut it out!" Tony Willis looked aggrieved. "It's bad enough having one of you telepaths around—but with two of you together anyone else is out in the cold. What do you want for breakfast?"

They apologized and kept their special talents under wraps. Lynne felt a certain disappointment at the prosaic familiarity of the food and drink they were served. She didn't know exactly what she had been expecting but there was no trace of the exotic.

Nor was the aircar in which

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Willis drove them from the spaceport to New Samarkand any different from similar vehicles on Earth—save that it seemed somewhat battered and in need of a refinish. She and Rolf rode in silence, letting Tony do the talking.

They traveled at about five hundred meters altitude toward a low range of reddish hills, sprinkled here and there with green. The sky was cloudless, the ground beneath them innocent of roads, of cultivation, of homes. For the first time Lynne began to appreciate the immensity of the task these emigrées from Earth had undertaken, the rehabilitation of a near-dead planet.

And then, when they crested the hill, there were rectangular patches of vegetation on its lee side. But she gave this man-made miracle only the briefest of glances—for beyond lay the vast bank of the canal, stretching as far as the eye could see, in a straight line from horizon to horizon. And beyond the canal lay the city.

Here, on the far bank of the incredible dry ditch, men had built well. Plastic half-domes and metallic towers, spare and functional, rose from the newly-buttressed escarpment for a good two kilometres. Beneath the buildings, on the bank itself, were broad terraces upon which passenger and freight-craft and landing engines made a busy and familiar pattern, kaleidoscopic with movement.

And behind the man-made city, its incredible soaring half-ruined spires and obelisks cutting a jagged rampart across half the sky, lay the once-vast Martian metropolis. Crystaline minarets, revealing materials and a beauty of design unknown as yet to Earthmen, reflected the rays of the distant sun in prismatic showers of color, coruscating, almost blinding, yet so weird and beautiful that they brought tears to Lynne's eyes.

I'm glad you can capture their beauty. Rolf's thought shared the excitement of her own. *So many of us see nothing but ruin.*

"Quite a sight, isn't it?" said Tony Willis complacently. "We get a *farbish* howl from the acheological boys whenever we have to clear any of it away."

"It seems a shame," said Lynne with feeling.

Willis shrugged. "Can't be helped. We haven't the time or resources to build from scratch in the sand. Besides, there's oceans of ruins left for them to poke around in."

He brought them in with practised skill to a landing on one of the terraces, where Rolf was quickly gobbled up by a waiting group of men and women. Before they led him off he said to Lynne, "I'm sorry if I've seemed unfair, Lynne. But I think you'll understand in time. This is a frontier world and we can't always take time out to observe the niceties."

Some inner emotion she refused to recognize caused her to ask, "When will I see you again, Rolf? You aren't leaving me . . ."

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"Tony can take care of you as well as I," he informed her. "I'd like to get you started myself but I'm way behind in my work. I'll be paying you a visit at the post—perhaps sooner than you expect."

"I see." She felt frozen. Now that he had her here he was discarding her like an old clout. She recalled what Tony Willis had said at the spaceport about his having a thousand women eating out of his hand, how eagerly Joanna had expressed a desire to meet him the night before. She was glad there had been no opportunity to perform that introduction. Why make it a thousand-and-two?

As he walked slowly away, with the reception committee dancing attendance about him, she received a faintly mocking thought projection from him, became aware that he was enjoying her jealousy. She felt her face flame again, said, "*Ferkab!*"—all but stamped her foot.

"What was that?" Tony Willis asked politely.

"Nothing—my clout slipped," she replied, embarrassed.

Lynne was taken to a gaunt office whose chief piece of furniture was an immense Martian globe, upon which all the chief Martian cities, all the human settlements, all the communications posts were marked. She began to understand, from looking at it, how very different conditions upon the red planet were from the Earth norm.

The home planet, heavily overpopulated, was skilfully disguised to appear roomy. Virtually every inch of its land surface was devoted to giving crowded humanity the illusion of privacy. Aloneness was one of its most prized cultural assets.

On Mars, with its scant million humans and solitude ever-present, all cultural efforts were bent the other way—to create the illusion of a large number of people that did not exist. Instead of seeking privacy the inhabitants gratefully crowded close together in their small communities, seeking strength through numbers.

"We're making progress—tremendous progress," Tony told her seriously, tapping a point on the globe. "The more ground we get under cultivation the more atmosphere we reclaim through the plant-breathing process. What we actually need is a few hundred million more people—but the planet will barely support those we have. It's a slow and laborious process."

"Operation bootstrap," said Lynne, wondering how she could even briefly have found this dedicated young man ridiculous.

"Exactly," he told her. "I take it Rolf has briefed you a little about your job here."

"A little," she said. "I'm to relieve my brother—right?"

"Right." He nodded. "We can short-cut your training because you are his twin. Ordinarily we take a couple of weeks fitting each communications worker to his or her

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post—finding in just which their telepathic sensitivity will work the best. But since, in a way, we *know* about you through Revere, we can save time."

"Revere," she said, "what about him? Is he very sick?"

Tony Willis shrugged. "It's periodic," he told her. "This whole business is so new and so sudden it hit most of them without warning. Since you know the score you ought to be able to fight it."

"But mightn't I have my brother's weaknesses?" Lynne asked.

"We're hoping not," was the reply. "In most cases women resist better than men. The suggestions these creatures make are so *swackably* lewd they clash with the feminine propriety-barrier."

"While men, being Casanovas, give in," she said, thinking again of Rolf and his thousand-and-two women.

"Something like that," he replied, went on to tell her how telepathic messages were keyed and directed and addressed to reach the proper destinations. "You'll be here"—tapping a spot on the globe, a third of a world away from New Samarkand—"at Barkutburg, within mentarange of Zuleika, New Walla Walla and Cathayville. So here will be the code-keys for you to remember . . ."

The final briefing took sixteen hours. If Lynne, through her years of coaching for and year of work on the integration-team, had not been trained to complete concentration over long periods, she would never have been able to absorb all the new knowledge Tony Willis and other communications experts pumped into her.

At the end of that time he looked at her with red-rimmed but admiring eyes, shook his head and said, "My hat is off to you, Lynne. You're the quickest study I've ever met."

"Thanks—most of it's a matter of training," she replied modestly. She was glad he was not telepathic or he would have read the bright glow of far-from-modest pride that ran through her. *Wait till Rolf hears about it,* she thought. *Maybe he won't think I'm such a* marlet *after all.* With this went added pride in that she was obviously less exhausted than her mentor.

When it was over she was fed real meat for the fourth or fifth time in her life—ham from lean Martian-bred hog, basted in some curious alien sauce. With it went real potatoes and non-processed vegetables, raised on the red planet. Rugged or not, Lynne decided as she was bundled into a planetcar, life on Mars had its compensations.

When the ship landed at Barkutburg a tearose-pale Martian dawn was lighting the dark eastern sky. Lynne felt a tingle of anticipation, mixed with dread, a stir of *déja vu* —the I've-been-here-before feeling —as she alighted with her strangely light bag in hand and paused to sip sparingly of her oxyrespirator.

For here was her nightmare city,

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though seen from the ground. Here were the widely-spaced transparent towers, similar to yet oddly unlike those of New Samarkand. Here were the scant human dwellings, clustered like alien mushroom growths amid the towering demi-ruins.

Two aluminum-coveralled figures were awaiting her at the rim of the airport. One was tiny, feminine, despite the bulk of her costume, her exotically delicate Eurasian features roughened by wind and sunburn. She was Lao Mei-O'Connell, qualified and elected leader of the pioneer settlement. The other was—Revere Fenlay.

It was odd to see oneself mirrored in the features of another human for the first time in one's life, Lynne decided. She noted her brother looked unexpectedly healthy, that his handclasp was firm, his eyes probably clearer than her own sleep-puffed ones.

His thought was warningly clear. *Don't be fooled by externals, Lynne. These creatures can move in on me every time I open up my mind to receive a message. They're murder!* Aloud he said, "Lord, I had no idea my counterpart was a beauty."

Quite naturally she linked arms with Revere as they walked toward the cluster of Earth-dwellings. It was, she thought, a rare event for twins, separated by the gulf between planets, ever to meet after incubation—except of course on such rarified levels as those trod by Rolf Marcein and his brother. She sensed a discomfort, a reserve, behind the routine welcome of Lao Mei-O'Connell, decided swiftly there was some sort of guilt feeling there.

As swiftly her twin replied telepathically, *Of course she has feelings of guilt. Thanks to her I was given the coldwrap treatments—even when I was not under Their control. There was no need for them and they made me feel my head would burst. Thank* farb *you're here!*

When did you receive these treatments? she thought sharply. And the answering thought confirmed her sudden suspicion. Revere had been placed in coldwrap restraint each time a headache had assailed her on Earth. He had been deliberately tortured as part of the campaign to get her to come to Mars and replace him.

That Rolf—that marlet! Fury assailed her, fury and frustration. But Revere's grip tightened on her forearm.

I don't mind—now, he informed her. *We need you here.*

It was pathetic but she managed to still the thought aborning. With Revere, as never before in her life, she felt as if she belonged to someone, as if someone belonged to her. But she had not been with him an hour when he said good-bye. He was returning to New Samarkand on the planet-ship for treatment, perhaps ultimately to Earth to replace her.

"Don't worry," he told her. "You'll do great, Lynne. Wring

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their *farbish* invisible necks."

She checked the thrill of panic that caused her, managed a. *Look up Ray Cornell when you hit Earth. And ruin Janet just for me.*

Don't be too rough on Rolf was his farewell thought. *You'll understand him better—later on.*

She watched the takeoff, walked back with Lao Mei-O'Connell in silence. And, twenty minutes later, she stepped off the uplift platform and found herself alone in the patched tower-room of her nightmare.

VI

Sitting there alone, waiting for something to happen, Lynne for the first time since becoming aware of her telepathic powers began to get a sense of direction along with the thoughts that came to her from outside. Heretofore she had only been conscious of the thoughts themselves, varying in power according to the strength of the thinker.

Perhaps because of the altitude of the tower-room, perhaps because her own power was increasing with practise, perhaps because telepathy was easier in the thinner Martian atmosphere than on Earth—perhaps through a combination of all these factors, Lynne was aware of tremendous mental strength.

Her on-duty periods consisted of two daily shifts, each of about two Earth-hours. In case of an emergency message reaching her during any other time, she was to report at once to her tower-post and remain on duty for the duration. And this was her first shift.

She wondered how long it would take the Martians that had possessed Revere to seek her out and test her defenses. Apparently these invisible creatures operated upon a time-scale of their own, making themselves felt without semblance of rhythm or regular schedule.

Shutting out the meaningless scramble of thoughts that reached her from the Earth-village below, Lynne considered Revere and the odd constraint that had prevailed between them during their brief single meeting. Somewhere beyond the gaunt reddish Martian hills to the southeast, the planet-ship was carrying him swiftly toward New Samarkand—and, she hoped, toward rehabilitation.

Revere had had a rough deal on this outpost world. Although he seemed not to resent it Lynne found herself trembling with indignation at thought of the needless torture he had undergone—merely to give Lynne the induced headaches that had undermined her Earth-conditioning. She thought of Rolf and his thousand-and-two women.

And from somewhere, half a planet away, came a quick mocking thought from the Svengali who had led her to a planet she had never had the slightest desire to visit. It said, *Don't bother me now, Lynne —can't you see I'm busier than* farb?

So thrilling was the experience,

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so magnificent the surge of power which swept through her, that Lynne actually forgot to be angry at receiving such a quick brush-off. Even a half-world away, she thought, she could key in on Rolf, learn what he was doing.

A thousand-and-one other women? She sipped sparingly at her oxyrespirator, felt reinforced exhilaration. With her new-found ability she was going to be able to check up on his alleged love-life. She actually gloated as she sat there alone amid the spare Martian landscape.

Then, feeling somewhat ashamed, she thought of her twin again. Evidently he was keeping his mind closed for she could not reach him. She wondered what he was really like, what—say—Lao Mei-O'Connell felt about him. And all at once she knew, for the Eurasian woman's mind was an open book.

The Barkutburg leader was almost physically sick at Revere's departure. Her thoughts of love, of desolation, were so strong that Lynne found herself sharing them, even though she had seen her twin but a scant few minutes since attaining an age of reason.

Yet there were strength and determination and a strong sense of duty holding Lao Mei-O'Connell to her important tasks of seeing that her share of reclaiming a planet continued. The frail-looking Martian woman was, Lynne realised, a person of vast character.

She thought of her having deliberately to torture the man she loved, through drugs that opened his already sick mind to the invaders, and wondered if she herself would be capable of such behavior, no matter how urgent the circumstance, to—say—Rolf Marcein.

It was then that her first message came through—so unused was she to receiving telepathically impersonal thoughts that she all but missed her code signal. The Zuleika operator had to repeat it three times before Lynne came to with a start and keyed her own thoughts properly—*Ess-two, Barkutburg. Ess-two, Barkutburg. Come in.*

The message itself concerned a supply of chemilamps, which had arrived at Zuleika from Cathayville and was ready for transhipment, if they were needed at Barkutburg. Lynne repeated the message, pressed the hand-buzzer for ground-communication, relayed the news to Lao Mei-O'Connell in her office below. She was told to notify Zuleika to send the chemilamps on at once, as they were sorely needed.

Lynne got the message through, after which the Zuleika telepath flashed, *You're new on the job. How is Fenlay?*

This is Fenlay here, she replied. *Revere's twin, Lynne. He's been sent to New Samarkand for treatment.*

Welcome, Lynne Fenlay—and good luck, came the answer. *Met any of our unseen friends yet?*

Not yet, thought Lynne, *when are they apt to hit me?*

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There's no telling. Lynne received a definite impression of a shrug. The Zuleika operator gave his name, which was Zachary Ramirez, then signed off for the time being. Thanks to this brief personal conversation Lynne no longer felt so alone. At least, when the invaders attacked her, she'd have someone to reach for—or would she?

There was a message from New Walla Walla direct, about an hour later, concerning some point of bookkeeping. Lynne handled it, then sat out the rest of her first tour of duty alone. The Martian sun was high in the sky when at last she took the downlift to the ground.

She found herself ravenously hungry. Either through some effect of the alien atmosphere and climate or the knowledge the food she would get was real rather than fabricated, Lynne found herself thinking about dining in an almost animal fashion.

Nor was the mess disappointing. All residents of Barkutburg shared a single dining hall, since such a method represented great economy of time, labor and food supplies. It was, to Lynne, rather like a greatly enlarged and much more volatile Mother Weedon's. The other residents of the settlement wore the uniform ruddiness of unmistakable good health. To Lynne, accustomed to the more pallid countenances of Earth, they seemed almost vulgar.

Yet the good humor, the camaraderie, were unmistakable—as were the animal spirits. Lynne, as a pretty girl and new arrival, got more masculine attention than ever before in her life. She was plied with offers to see the Martian ruins, to visit the nearby mountaintops, to take long excursions through the vast dry canal-beds.

To her relief the other girls and women, unless their thoughts lied, showed very little resentment at her presence. In fact most of them were as eager as the men to question her about the home planet—though their questions were cast in more feminine mould. Yet Lynne played her welcome cautiously, accepting no dates for the present on the plea that mastery of her new job demanded all her time and strength.

A few days later Lao Mei-O'Connell suggested the two of them go for a walk. When they were well out of earshot of the others she said, "You're handling yourself very well, Lynne. So far so good."

Lynne eyed her, carefully avoiding a probe of her mind—she had no wish to make an enemy of this woman and the basic situation was emotionally delicate to begin with. She said, "Then you anticipate trouble, Miss O'Connell?"

"Lao, please," she said. "There's scant room for social formality in a settlement like Barkutburg. You'll have some trouble, of course—you're bound to on an alien planet. I hate to think of what I'd have to go through to adjust to Earth."

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"Fair enough," Lynne said gratefully. She wanted to ask Lao about Revere, what sort of man he was, some of his little habits. She also began to understand better why Earth-Mars twins were kept so rigorously apart as a rule. The relationship was a complex and deep one and she found herself almost as homesick for her twin as was Lao.

"Life is hard here," Lao said, "but not unhappy. It isn't even particularly earnest, save for necessary jobs. Work hard, play hard, rest hard—that's the rule of Mars."

"It sounds good," said Lynne sincerely. "Tell me, Lao, just what *is* the status of electricity on Mars? I was a little worried when you wanted the chemilamps so urgently. But we have the communicator phones and electric cooking . . ."

"It's a strange problem," said the other woman. "Everything works as long as we can use a closed circuit on this planet. But the minute we open one up—for lateral broadcasting, say—it is dissipated—like *that!*" She snapped thin fingers sharply.

Then she added, "But nature seemed to have compensated in our favor when we were able to develop telepaths." She eyed Lynne speculatively, added, "You must have tremendous powers. No other Earth-person has ever been able to make the grade. From what Rolf Marcein told me you were outstanding the moment Revere reached you."

"I don't pretend to understand it," said Lynne. "As far as my first few sessions on duty, it seemed to be all right."

"You weren't bothered?" The question was softly urgent.

"No." Lynne shook her head. "But I'm expecting to be."

"You will be, I'm afraid. Every telepath on Mars has been at least once. Revere had the bad luck to be the first—before the presence of these beings was even suspected. Hence he was surprised and his resistance was unprepared. Once they've gained possession it becomes progressively more difficult to keep them out."

"I suppose," said Lynne, "they pick on telepaths because they can only enter minds opened for message-reception."

"Probably," Lao informed her. "We can't be certain of anything until we know more about them and their motives. But you can see what a threat it has become. Thanks to the paralysis of lateral electronic communication, the survival of humanity on Mars depends almost entirely on telepaths. When these zombies or whatever they are take possession no telepath is worth a damn. Nor can any of them receive messages while the aliens are threatening them. If they do . . ."

Lao's silence was eloquent. Lynne took a sip of oxygen as her breathing became difficult. They were approaching one of the semi-ruined structures, a vast edifice, squatter and broader than the slim pinnacle which contained the broadcasting

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room, whose lower facade was a mass of friezes in high-relief.

Lynne, as part of her cultural training on Earth, had been taken on tours of the vast temples of India, Pakistan and Malaya—including Ankhor Vat. Yet not even the incredible and bizarre reliefs of those fabulous temples, with all of their grotesqueries and solemnly religious obscenities, prepared her for what she now saw.

The pantheocratic creatures of ancient Mars were far more diverse than their counterparts on Earth—and of course utterly exotic. Here were creatures with two, three and four heads, with innumerable appendages, with reproductive organs so weird as to defy comment or moral reaction.

One feature Lynne noted at once. Like their Asiatic counterparts on Earth, they seemed to belong to a theocratic rather than a scientific culture—yet the buildings themselves were utterly beyond the creative techniques of even an interplanetary human culture.

She said, "Are the other towers of Mars like this?"

"In general," replied the Eurasian girl. "The aborigines seem to have been mostly a philosophic sort. Perhaps they became so when their planet began to die. All that have survived are such low life-orders as the *czanworm* and sand-*lurtonk*. Unless, of course, the invisible ones are natives. I for one am inclined to believe they are."

"So does Rolf Marcein," said Lynne.

"You love him, don't you?" Lao asked matter-of-factly.

"I'm beginning to be afraid so," said Lynne as frankly.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," replied the other. "I love Revere, you know—and I don't expect to see him ever again."

"I know," said Lynne, feeling her companion's unhappiness like a knife. She pulled the parka over her head although it was not the cool Martian afternoon breeze that was making her cold. She said, "It must have been very difficult for you—what you had to do to help get me here. I don't wonder if you hate me."

"I don't hate you, Lynne," said Lao. "But if you fail on this job I shall. I should not enjoy sacrificing Revere for nothing."

"I won't fail," Lynne told her with more assurance than she felt. "After all, I have Revere to think of—and you—*and* Rolf."

"I encourage myself with similar thoughts," said Lao. "Come—let us go on inside."

It was like entering a pagan cathedral. The tower in which Lynne's post was bore heavy overmarks of human habitation. Probably, she thought, it had long since been stripped by the archeologists of any objects of historical or cultural value. Save for its crystaline flying buttresses it might almost have been an Earth skyscraper.

But, outside of a few pieces of

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scaffolding, where restoration work or study was evidently in progress, this immense building had been left untouched by the new inhabitants of the red planet. Thanks probably to the thinness and dryness of the atmosphere, brilliant murals had retained their coloring intact. Yet in numerous patches the colors seemed to fade into neutral tints at variance with the brightness of the rest.

"Here." Lao took from a table, on which tools and other instruments had been laid, an odd-looking stereoptical device, handed it to Lynne, adding, "Adjust it and you'll get the full effect. A lot of their work was done below the human color-scale, in the infra-red."

Lynne gasped when she studied the hitherto drab patches in the murals through the double-eyepiece of the viewer. She saw strange beings, hauntingly near-human, engaged in fantastic gambols. Multifaceted eyes leered out at her from the Capuchin heads of twin-bodied smaller creatures of a boldness that almost made her flinch. And there were endlessly varied poses of both sorts of beings . . .

"Rather disturbing, isn't it?" said Lao. "I didn't bring you out here just to see the sights, Lynne. From what little your brother was able to tell me, the odd little games those creatures are playing are very like those his invaders hinted at."

"You mean," said Lynne with a shudder, "that the zombies or whatever they are looked like that before they lost their bodies?"

"Or before they became invisible," said Lao quietly. "The near-humans seem to have been the dominant species. These others—the twin-bodied monkeylike things—seem to have been their pets."

"What disgusting games they played!" said Lynne. "They sound a lot like . . ." She hesitated, realising she was about to repeat Lao's remark.

"Exactly," said Lao.

They walked back to the settlement in silence. Both girls had a great deal to ponder over. When they got there Lynne settled down to listen to some musicrolls in the recreation building and Lao left to tend to her various executive functions.

Lynne's new life on Mars passed without notable incident for another week, Earth-time. She was beginning to adjust to days and nights almost twice as long as those of her home planet, to the small cool sun, to the use of her oxyrespirator whenever her lungs felt empty.

She was even beginning to enjoy the give-and-take of the neo-pioneer society of Barkutsburg. Yet loneliness continued to gnaw at her, loneliness for the twin she had known such a short time, loneliness for Rolf, at whose activities she could only guess. And some of her guesses were in lurid vidarcolor.

Late one afternoon, in the recreation building, the musicroll was

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playing a fine concerto for theraharp by Liston-Lutz, the most important human composer yet to emerge on Mars. Back on Earth his music had seemed to Lynne to be both glaringly dissonant and a trifle decadent. Here on Mars she understood it. He was writing of the red planet itself, of a world that had all but died and was now having its life renewed through lusty Earth-pioneers.

"Like it?" one of the engineers enjoying an off-shift rest asked Lynne over a colafizz globe.

"Very much. It—fits," said Lynne. She was still smiling at him when the headache came back—with a sharpness and depth of discomfort she had never felt on Earth. For a full minute or two she thought she was going to be physically sick from the pain.

She managed to get up and move toward her quarters before anyone noticed she was feeling badly. It would never do to have them worried about *her*—after all, they had enough to worry about. Besides, she knew what was the matter. Revere was in New Samarkand and they were doing something to him, something that might easily either kill him or drive him permanently insane.

VII

Lynne lay down on her simple cot and tried to flash a personal message through to Revere. But all she got was an increase of agony that almost blacked her out.

Then she tried to reach Rolf Marcein. Although she lacked the advantage of being high in her tower-post, the emotional urgency of the moment more than compensated for this adverse factor. She got through to him quickly, discovered his mind was open. So intense was his concentration that he seemed momentarily unaware of her probing.

He was sitting in a hospital room, an operating room, and Revere lay in front of him, stretched out on a surgical table. Sight of him made Lynne feel another wave of nausea. An anestherator had been attached to his nose and mouth and an alert nurse stood by the regulator. Revere's temples had been slit by twin incisions, from which tubes were attached to an odd and complex piece of machinery that seemed to support a visual-grid.

Rolf Marcein was digging at her twin mentally, at the same time seeking to receive whatever messages came from his tortured brain. Lynne could read Rolf's thoughts clearly as he waved to her twin, *Their shape—you of all of us must have received some vision of their appearance.* Crehut, *Fenlay, we've got to know how they think of themselves!*

Then came a chaotic jumble of answering thoughts from Revere's damaged brain. And even as she suffered sympathetic anguish Lynne understood that with full anesthesia the mind itself would be dulled so

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that no messages would be possible. It was a hideous moment.

I'm trying, Rolf—I'm trying . . . In spite of the agony he was undergoing Lynne's brother was beginning to formulate his thoughts. Little by little a picture was building itself on the screen. It was a wispy fragmentary picture, like a vidarscreen suffering from old-fashioned television "ghosts." The figures he projected looked wispy, blurred, repeated side by side in overlapping focus.

Lynne noted that Rolf and the alert attendants present were using stereoscopic devices, forced herself to see through the mind of one of them, to learn the impressions they were getting of the infra-red portions of the picture.

It was like some of the images Lynne had seen earlier on the Martian mural—but all balled up. It looked like one of the near-human dominant species, yet had the multiple body of one of their disgusting pets. Its antics were even more suggestive than the mural.

Lynne quickly re-transferred herself. She remembered all at once what Tony Willis had told her about women being better able to resist the aliens than men. They were incredible, impossible, she thought, yet there was a hint of intense pleasure in their . . .

All at once she lost the entire image in a flash of worry, confusion and finally frustration. Yet her headache persisted, grew worse, and she got a definite impression that Revere was dying, that Rolf was mercilessly goading him on to destruction. Outraged, she tried to key furious thoughts in Rolf's direction—but so greatly was she herself suffering that she was unable to focus her powers.

Then, abruptly, the agony was over. Whatever had happened was finished, done with. Lynne sat up on her bed, feeling limp and sore all over, as if she had taken a physical beating. She ran an acti-comb through her blond hair, freshened up her looks generally, though she felt like the proverbial wrath of Satan, went out to the recreation room. At the moment she needed human company.

Through a window she saw that the sun was low in the west, looked in awe at the brilliant colors of the Martian sunset. Thanks to the thinner atmosphere and its high impregnation of dust, the brilliance far exceeded anything on Earth, even though the sun looked far-away and cold.

Someone offered her a colafizz, which she accepted gratefully. She tried to reach Revere but got only a wall of blankness. He was either *unconscious*—or *dead*, she decided. She didn't know whether to be relieved or grief-stricken at the prospect. True, Revere was her identical twin—yet she barely knew him, had no real close ties.

Then Lao appeared and under the artificial lighting of the chemi-lamps, Lynne was surprised to note how tired the Eurasio-Martian girl

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looked. She appeared thin enough to be blown away by the first breeze and there were deep purple circles under her slightly tilted black almond-eyes—yet the fingers that gripped her skinless cigarette were rock-steady.

She said, "They've done something to Revere, haven't they?"

"I think so," Lynne replied. "How did you know?"

"I felt it—until just lately," said Lao. "Most of us are somewhat telepathic on Mars. In moments of emotional stress especially."

"I'm not sure what's happened," Lynne told her. "They were trying to get him to record the shape of the invaders on a grid."

Lao's already pale face turned ashy-white. She whispered, "I *knew* it! They've used the necro-recorder on him."

"What is it?" Lynne inquired.

"It's a Martian device—supposed to get impressions from the minds of dying men. It was used in the early days when we had more crime." There was sudden listlessness in her manner.

Lynne read her thoughts all too plainly. Lao Mei-O'Connell was stunned with grief. No one, it seemed, had ever survived treatment with this machine—survived to sanity at any rate. So Revere was dead—or as good as dead.

Lynne looked blankly at the Eurasian woman, utterly unable to think under the sudden shock of her words. And then, out of nowhere, came the fragment of a thought. *Don't give up the spaceship, Lynne—tell Lao I'm not completely batty yet.*

It was Revere—unquestionably. Lynne tried to get him again but the blank wall was back. Only now, for some reason, it didn't seem so terrifying. She looked at Lao, who said, "You got something just now, Lynne. Was it . . . ?"

Lynne nodded. "It was Revere. He—he asked me to tell you he's okay—not completely batty yet was the way he put it."

For a moment doubt blanked Lao's face. Then she smiled and looked on the verge of passing out herself. She said, "I might not have believed you, Lynne. But that phrase—it's—well, it's the way he would have said it."

"It was Revere," Lynne repeated. She looked at the chronometer above the door of the room, realized it was getting late. "I've barely got time to eat dinner," she said. "I don't want to miss my shift."

"No, you don't," the other told her. "There might be a message."

"Why not share it with me?" Lynne offered. "I could use some company."

Lao shook her head regretfully. "I've got a million things to do here," she said. Then, with the ghost of a smile lighting her exotic features, "Besides, I'd be afraid it might be bad news."

"I'll send you a message via the ground-communicator the second I learn anything," Lynne told her.

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Then the two women went in to dine at the head table. They were two islands of preoccupation amid the rough good-humored gaiety of the room. It was Saturday night at Burkutburg and there was going to be a dance.

Lynne found herself wondering at the morals of her new companions. They certainly didn't seem backward about sex—and the planet-wide dislike of privacy seemed to extend into even their most intimate personal relationships. Yet when Lynne thought about Janet Downes and certain other young men and women of the supposedly more civilized home planet, she decided the Martians were probably the nicer. At any rate they lived their emotional lives right out in the open.

For the first time since her first few days on the red planet she felt alone as she stepped off the uplift and entered her listening and message-post, high in the crystal tower. There was something frightening about sitting alone in this ruined building with the wind making its night sounds through the flying buttresses about her and what appeared like the whole of Mars stretched out in panorama before her.

It had looked desolate enough in the daylight. Now, with the stars blazing an enigmatic backdrop, it looked dark—and twice as desolate. Lynne found herself wondering what strange and fearsome caravans, what hideous battles and frightful plagues, had passed within view of her post. She seemed to see again the strange capering figures of the murals and bas-reliefs, and of the vision-grid she had viewed telepathically that afternoon in the distant hospital room at New Samarkand.

She told herself she was getting the jams, sent a tune-up message through to Cathayville. Through the telepathic operator should have been on duty there was no response. She reached out further to locate Revere, could not get to him, found Rolf. He told her, *Lay off, you* marlet, *Lynne. You nearly jammed the works this afternoon.*

How is Revere? She was insistent.

In coma—and hereafter use the proper channels, Lynne. You're supposed to key all messages for New Samarkand through Cathayville.

Cathayville fails to answer, she informed him.

Cease sending at once! Cease sending at once, Lynne. If Cathayville is out it means . . . Cease sending at once!

What does it mean? Lynne was unused to Martian directness, unused to taking peremptory orders, especially from a man. She had no intention of obeying before she was good and ready and . . .

Suddenly they were there, all around her. Thanks to having viewed the murals and the scene on the visual grid that afternoon she was able to get some idea of their nature—or what had been their

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nature before a dying globe had driven them to seek the refuge of pure thought and feeling-forms.

First one of them came fluttering into the room, like some giant invisible moth, then came another and another and another until she lost count. They were gay for some reason and nibbled at her mind like moths nibbling at wool in a closet.

Worse, now that she had allowed them into her brain she was unable to drive them out. They darted away, amused, just beyond the reach of her questing probe. Then they came back, doing their strange dances and whispering outrageous suggestions. Alien or not they had definite erotic appeal, that awakened in Lynne responses she had never before suspected she possessed.

What kind of creature am *I?* she thought hysterically after a particularly ingenious lascivious mental embrace. And then, from some hidden source, she drew the strength to fight. She concentrated as never before in her life—even while working with the group-machine—and little by little began to win the battle with the aliens.

You'll regret it—just let us have the loan of your body and we'll show you joys you have never dreamt of. The thoughts pounded at her head with frail persistent powdery punches, that promised to win through sheer weight of numbers what they lacked in power.

But Lynne forced herself to think of kindly prosaic Mother Weedon. At once, seizing upon her thought, the invaders suggested all sorts of indecent sports for that mature lady. And the very idea of Mother Weedon indulging in such pursuits was so absurd that Lynne was unable to resist laughing out loud.

At once the creatures were gone. They were unable to stand the brain waves of ridicule. Lynne wondered about it. For the moment she felt carried aloft on a wave of high excitement at her victory. She tried to code through a message to Rolf Marcein through the proper Cathayville channel.

Cathayville had been attacked earlier in the evening and for awhile the telepath on duty had been forced to keep his mind resolutely shut, lest he fall prey to the enemy. Repulsed, they had moved on to Barkutburg and Lynne. She gave the message for relay, received information to the effect that Rolf Marcein's current whereabouts were unknown and that he was maintaining a closed mind to all messages and was therefore not to be reached.

Lynne felt terribly alone at this message and the invaders chose that moment, while her mind was still open, to return in greater force. This time Lynne found herself in actual pain. Their promise was no longer mere physical pleasure—although their abandonment of bodies had unquestionably led them to overstress the joys of the flesh. Now they promised pain unless Lynne were to give way to them, the sort of pain, a thousand times

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magnified, that she had felt sympathetically while Revere was enduring similar attack.

She tried to concentrate on Mother Weedon but the creatures were not to be fooled twice by the same ruse. This time it was their laughter that hurt. Lynne cast about wildly for help from any telepath within mental reach, lest she actually surrender body and mnid to their control. She even tried to reach Lao Mei-O'Connell but the Eurasian woman was not telepathic enough to respond to the appeal.

Then, as she was about to give up, support reached her. Revere was sending to her, helping her to steady herself. She could sense his complete exhaustion, felt concern for him even while she accepted gratefully his mental powers of assistance. Only such a relationship as theirs, she realised, could cope with the blanketing torment of the invaders.

He was telling her something, that Rolf and the others had compiled some sort of error that afternoon from the vision-grid. The thought ran, *They think they know what the creatures are now but they don't. Even* I *don't. My images were mixed. They are not the dominant near-human species we thought but something else . . .*

Slowly his thoughts faded once more, unable to hold out against the fatigue that was plaguing him. But his hopeless message of defeat had sprung a fresh thought-train in Lynne's mind, one that so occupied her attention she was able to hold the invaders at bay almost without effort.

She recalled the murals—the near-human looking dominants and their pets with the disgusting dual bodies and vile games and many-faceted eyes. She thought back to what Revere had just said via thought-waves—*They are not the dominant near-human species we thought but something else . . .*

She saw once more, in clear memory-vision, the telepathic picture that had come to her of Rolf and Revere and the visual-grid. No wonder the pictures had looked foggy and full of "ghosts." In his mind's eye, limited by the fixed belief of Mars that only the dominant species could have survived in invisible form, Revere had tried to project these near-humans onto the screen.

Inwardly, subconsciously, he had known better. The dominant species had *not* survived—on Mars at any rate. It was the horrid little creatures with the multi-faceted eyes and the capuchin-like heads and the dual bodies that had managed to shed their corporate existence and still maintain life of a sort. The masters had gone—the beasts remained . . .

Lynne felt a wave of delight at her discovery, realised it was more a result of her not having been inhibited by the traditions of Martian conditioning than through any genius of her own. For an instant she let down the bars of her mind—and the invaders, hovering unseen

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about her in the tower-room, came swarming in for their third and fiercest attack. They knew she had guessed their nature, were determined to prevent Lynne from making the discovery clear to other humans. For they too were telepathic.

VIII

This time they actually knocked Lynne to the floor of the tower-room. It was greater torment than she had ever endured in her life. Somehow she could sense the pattern behind its intensity, even while she was in the grip of a mental confusion that seemed to be burning out the very fibers of her brain.

This was the showdown, the decisive battle. Her being imported to Mars had been a step in the dual between the invisible aliens and the Communications Integration of the red planet, headed by Rolf Marcein and his telepaths and other department workers.

Unless the aliens were stopped and stopped now there would be no holding them. Earthfolk on Mars were becoming increasingly telepathic and telepaths were the prey of the invisible foes. Lynne *knew* somehow, from the thoughts of the aliens, that they had been growing steadily in strength since the arrival of the Earthmen on their planet, that after a creepingly slow revival for decades they had finally snowballed to sufficient power to make open attacks upon human brains laid bare for telepathic communication. They longed to renew the lost pleasures of the flesh through possession of human bodies.

Rolf and the scientists had learned something that afternoon from Lynne's twin, something about the nature and life-form of the attackers that had hitherto been concealed from them. They were moving to the attack themselves—and it was of vital import to them that Lynne should now get through with the message that would reveal this true nature.

She tried desperately to reach Rolf—and when this effort failed to think of Mother Weedon or even plump Tony Willis engaged in amorous sports—but the keynote of the alien attack had been altered from suggestion of sensation to outright mental attack. Instead of bribery or blackmail through pain, she was being given sledgehammer treatment.

But she *had* to get her message through. Without her knowledge of the nature of the aliens Rolf would use faulty weapons against them, would lose precious time, time that might prove decisive for the survival of Earthmen on Mars.

Despairing, knowing she could not hold out much longer against the attack with her mind open, Lynne summoned reserve powers she did not know she possessed and swept the planet's surface with her thoughts, seeking Rolf. Her love for him, her fear for Revere's ultimate fate, her affection for her new comrades—all combined to help her

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make a final superhuman effort.

Yet for awhile it seemed that even this despairing try was destined to defeat. The floor was beginning to swim before her eyes when at last she reached Rolf, got him, lost him, got him again. With darkness closing about her she poured out her information, her theory, her surmises.

Faintly at last she felt Rolf's Crehut! *The multiple bodies on the visual screen we thought were ghosts—of course they're the survivors, rather than the near-humans! Thanks a million, honey, we'll know what to do now. Hold on out there—help is on its way.*

But Lynne could hold out no longer. She felt the invisible attackers come pouring through her weakened mental barriers—her last remembered vision was of the floor rising rapidly to strike her. She turned her face away just before it hit.

Lynne became aware of a lifting from her brain, of a cessation of pain that she had never actually felt. She opened her eyes, discovered she was still lying on the floor of the tower-room. But she was no longer surrounded by terror.

The patched portion of the wall had been smashed through and beyond it hovered the well-lighted outlines of a small aircraft. With her in the room was Rolf Marcein—and he was sweeping the apparently empty air about him with an odd-looking weapon. No flash or beam came from its squat muzzle but briefly, all around her, Lynne was aware of alien anguish, alien drainage, alien flight.

"That should do it for awhile, honey," he told her, helping her to her unsteady feet. "*Crehut!* What a show those blasted *marlets* put on this time. They tried to knock out the whole system simultaneously. Check the other stations, will you, honey?"

Automatically she did it. Cathayville came in clearly, as did New Walla Walla and Zuleika. Save for a few stations on the other side of the planet the communications network was clear once again. Lynne informed Rolf of the fact.

"Good," he said, pulling a skinless cigarette from his pocket and letting it ignite itself. "I guess we're solid now. The *purt* of it is they almost got us, before you could find out enough about them to knock them out for awhile."

"What sort of gun is that?" Lynne asked him. He had called her honey, he had saved her life, but so casually had he done it that she still felt definite constraint between them.

"We had to put it together in a hurry, once we got your message," he told her, patting it fondly. He held it up so that she could examine it better, added, "It isn't really a gun at all. We've been using the damned things for space and planetship external repairs for years now—you know how their outer skins pile up positive electricity . . ."

"I don't," she said. "Tell me."

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He shook his head, put an arm around her, scowled at her fiercely. "How come I managed to acquire such an ignoramus?" he asked rhetorically. "I'm not going to explain it all now but space-ships *do* pick up positive charges on their outer hulls and this thing is an anion gun that attracts and discharges negative juice.

"Our unseen visitors with the gone bodies are mostly positive electricity in their present form, honey," he went on. "This blaster of ours gives them a negative charge that wipes them right out." Rolf put an arm about her, led her unprotesting to the hovering vehicle outside. "I imagine they're beginning to wonder what in *purt's* been going on, down below."

But before he pressed the buttons that lowered the hovering pinnace to the planet's surface he drew her into the circle of his arms, kissed her, then said, "If you hadn't given us the clue to what these horrors were we'd never have had sense enough to know what to do. We couldn't conceive of the dominant species turning into this kind of force. But their pets, with the multiple bodies . . ."

Lynne and Lao Mei-O'Connell and most of the rest of the citizens of Barkutburg listened attentively while Rolf told them the full story. The trouble, it seemed, was caused by the fact that the Earthmen had brought electricity back to Mars.

"These creatures were forced to discard their corporeal bodies to survive on a planet as dead as this one," he went on. "Their food is electricity and they'd been existing on a starvation diet for thousands of years, until *we* got here."

"It's strange they never tried space-travel," said Lynne.

"I don't believe their philosophy admitted to such a materialistic solution," Rolf replied. "They must have progressed like *farb* in the spiritual direction to be able to discard their bodies at all. Probably couldn't manage it both ways."

"That makes sense, Rolf." Lao nodded, looked at Rolf with an appeal she could not put into words.

He understood, told her, "Your Revere is going to be right as *purt*. I know what you must have thought when Lynne gave you the message she got about what we were doing to him. I tried to conceal it for that reason but this young lady is too *farbly* strong telepathically to shut her out. I'm sorry I had to make him suffer but he understood. And I wasn't going to damage him permanently.

"We—that is, some of Tony Willis' bright young men, have managed to improve the necro-recorder so that it is no longer destructive of the mind of the usee. They'd been working on it against time—and against just such a situation as arose recently, when we were finally able to get Revere off duty for a bit."

"Thanks." Lao Mei-O'Connell said the word gratefully.

"It's been rough on you," Rolf

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told her, "but nothing like as rough as if our little friends got control of all the telepaths."

"What did they feed on that made them strong?" Lynne asked.

"Electricity," said Rolf. "Just because we couldn't make it work in open circuits doesn't mean we haven't tried. They got enough from our efforts partly to restore themselves—from such efforts and the leakage of our closed circuits. They were always sopping it up.

"But we didn't even know what they looked like, though we had our suspicions. They figured to be survivors of the dominant species on the planet before it dried up—but Revere's test this afternoon gave us our first doubts. We were still up a tree when Lynne got her message through. That *did* it!

"But it was touch and go. I grabbed a space-ship to get to Lynne, then took a pinnace. If we hadn't managed to get the anion guns ready tonight I think we'd have been licked for all our knowledge. Now we've got *them* licked. They can still raid our electricity once in awhile, but it's going to cost them."

That was about it. Lynne got up and went outside in the chill Martian night to smoke a skinless cigarette. A little while later Rolf came out and joined her. He slipped an arm around her again, hugged her, said, "*Purt,* isn't it?"

"I guess so." The constraint she felt in his presence was strong upon her. And she had been through a little too much too quickly. She said, "What about Revere?"

"He'll be back on the job in a little while," he said. "From what he told me before he went under this afternoon he wants to mate up with Lao Mei-O'Connell."

"That'll be fine," said Lynne, feeling suddenly very lonely. "But what happens to me?"

"One *zwirchy* guess!" he said, bringing his other arm into play.

"But if you drive off the aliens, why are you going to need telepaths?" She felt robbed of a fascinating new career before it was even begun.

"Don't you believe it," he told her. "Telepathy is going to be the keystone of the entire Martian culture. Now that we shan't have to confine people like you and Revere and me to communications we can use them a thousand other ways. Think of what telepathy will mean in education, in therapy, in sheer honesty and understanding!

"Besides . . ." He looked thoughtfully at the star-studded sky. "Man isn't always going to be limited to two puny planets. We've still to get a settlement working on Venus. And out there somewhere are the moons of Saturn and Jupiter. Think of how easy it will make the task if we have telepaths ready-made!"

He paused, forced her to look at him, said, "How about it, honey?"

She said, "You must be in love with your own voice—you didn't really have to *say* any of that. But watch what you think!"

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VISCOUS circle

by . . . A. Bertram Chandler

It's bad to be trapped in a time warp with anyone. And when anyone is Malaprop Jenkins it can adder a man's wits peppermintly.

FOREWORD

"This is up your alley," he said. "You might be able to do something with it. If I still had the bottle, the original paper, I'd chance sending it in to the Air Ministry or the Royal Society or somebody. But it's out of the question now. You know what happens to people who see sea-serpents!

"We were having boat drill off Fremantle, in Gage Roads. We were pulling back for the ship when I spotted this bottle. It was very bright in the sunlight, unlike any glass I've ever seen anywhere. It was a good shape too—lovely lines to it, graceful. So I leaned out of the boat and picked it up.

"It was on my desk all that day. People came in and admired it. It never occurred to any of us that there might be anything inside it—it was an opaque sort of glass but glittery, like an opal.

"The Second Mate came in just before dinner—he wanted to know if I had an empty gin bottle he could use for gasoline to clean his gyro compass. I had a gin bottle—but it wasn't empty and I wasn't going to give him *the* bottle. So we had a gin each and I started to pour what was left of it into the bottle I'd picked up.

Although Mr. Chandler, over the years, has been a valued contributor to scores of STF magazines, his proudest distinction lies in being the only member of his profession who is also a First Mate in the Australian Merchant Marine. Which makes him unique.

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"It had a funny cork by the way —sort of plastic. It was then we found there was a roll of paper inside. It was rum sort of stuff and covered with queer type-script, more like the markings you get on the toilet roll of a depth recorder. It was readable.

"The Second Mate was very excited—we both were. We thought it'd be as well to make a copy, which we did that night.

"And now comes the really funny part. We'd sweated and slaved over that beastly manuscript, taking turns at the typewriter. Then we'd rolled it up again and put it back in the bottle and then we'd settled down to finish the gin. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, the bottle just took off like a shooting star in reverse. It went right through the deckhead of my cabin —if you care to come aboard you can see the patch in the bridge planking.

"But this is the funny thing. It may have been the gin, yet I'll swear that the hole through which the bottle went was there a fraction of a second before the bottle got to it. The moon was shining through it quite brightly.

"And we had a helluva job explaining that hole to the Old Man."

I took the papers he gave me. As he said—it would have been absurd to have passed them in to the Meteorological Office of the Air Ministry or any of the other scientific bodies with which the sailor has occasional dealings.

But it's only right that *somebody* should see them.

—A. BERTRAM CHANDLER.

IT WAS A MISTAKE teaming up with Malaprop Jenkins. The fact the man's a killer is bad enough—especially now I know that sooner or later it'll be either him or me for the high jump. And I'd sooner it was him . . . But it's his murder of words that's worst of all.

The first time that he uses the right word in the wrong place it's funny. The fourteenth time it's just a little boring. By the fortieth time—and situated as we are there *must* be repetition—it's grounds for justifiable homicide.

But Jenkins knows where the weapons are in the cargo and he's helped himself to a point-five service blaster, complete with belt, holster and charges, and I can't find the pillaged case anywhere. I've found paper and a typewriter and they're helping to pass the incredible amount of time we have on our hands.

Jenkins, as befits a common thief, just rummages through the cargo. One day—do we still have days?—he got drunk and tried on the most flamboyant creations from out of a case of ladies' dresses. When I told him how childish it was he muttered that satin soon finds mischief for idle hands to do!

He's not the type I'd associate with ordinarily. I had no idea, when I first started faking my books,

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what I was letting myself in for. But it was just hard luck. *Silver Streak* was a dead cert for the Round-the-Moon Stakes—and how was I to know she'd blow a tube before she was clear of the stratosphere?

If it hadn't been for that the Bank would have got all its money back and nobody would have been any the wiser when the annual book-checking came round. As it was I had to get out fast. I helped myself to another ten thousand credits while I was about it. I knew that the Feds would run me down anywhere on Earth and my only hope was to get out and make a fresh start somewhere with no extradition.

Yes, the Federal Agents are smart—but there're people who are smarter. There's that old man in Sydney, for example. I'll not tell you his name—I had to swear a most blood-curdling oath that I'd never in any circumstances divulge it. And there's always the slim chance this story will be picked up somewhere, sometime, and an even slimmer chance that I come out of this mess in one piece.

And if I do and have let too many cats out of the bag there's any amount of people both on Earth and on Centaurus V who'd take a keen delight in having me liquidated, even though my brain might be wiped clean as a baby's by the penal psychologists and nicely fitted out with a set of ersatz memories. Mind you—I'd as soon be liquidated as have *that* happen to me but I certainly don't want to get in the bad books of both the Law and the Underground.

There was a man used to come into the bank now and again. I knew him to talk to and, of course, his address. He was respectable enough—on the surface—but it was common knowledge that he was some kind of punk, just too smart to be caught out in anything illegal. When I heard that the examiners were paying a visit the next day I thought of him at once.

As soon as I'd helped myself to the extra folding money I left the Bank, telling old Carmichael, the head cashier, that I wasn't well. He didn't try to stop me going—I suppose I looked pale enough for anything.

When I got to the roof there was a down-town 'copter just dropping in to the Stop. I got aboard and sat and fidgeted in the minute or so before it lifted and droned its leisurely way over the city, following the course of the Thames to the sea.

At every stop—Tower Bridge, Woolwich, Barking Creek—I was afraid a policeman would board and drag me from my seat. But it was far too early for anything of the kind to happen. The short journey was without incident. The 'copter went as far as Southend, the very edge of the city limits.

The man I was going to see lived at Southend. I found him in his apartment a little more than mid-

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way along the Pier. Whatever it was he did it must have paid—you don't get that kind of place for ten credits a week.

I saw his face in the hall telepanel as he answered my ring. I could see that he recognised me and that he was puzzled at my calling. I told him it was urgent. He looked thoughtful, then told me to come right up. The elevator that took me to the fifth floor let me out into the passageway not far from his door.

I couldn't help peering out cautiously, first one way, then the other, before I left the cage. While I was doing this a door opened and the man I had come to see looked out. He told me irritably to come in and wanted to know what I was playing at.

When I did tell him, inside his apartment, he was amused. I didn't see anything funny in it myself. But I suppose that the shady ways in which he made his living gave him a queer sense of humor. When he had finished laughing he said, "Well, what am I supposed to do about it?"

I didn't know quite what to say. I stammered something about thinking that he might be able to tell me—I forget what now. But I had a dreadful feeling that my one faint hope was going to prove a false one.

He laughed again and looked out of his window to the sunlit Thames Estuary, to a passing cruise liner bedecked with bright flags, appeared to be listening to the faint strains of music drifting from her crowded decks. Then, without turning to face me, he told me to make out an I.O.U. for two thousand credits.

"But I don't . . ." I began. He said he knew I didn't, but that I would by the time he was through with me. He didn't think he'd be caught with any of the notes I was going to give him, but just in case . . . He asked too if I had any preference.

"There's Mars," he told me, "and Venus. But they have been known to extradite criminals in exchange for their own bad baskets. There's the Jovian System and Pluto—but all I'd be fit for there would be unskilled manual labor. He turned round and looked at me and said rather insultingly that he didn't think I was cut out for that kind of thing, that in any case I wouldn't like the climate.

I was thinking, I told him, of Centaurus V.

He went to his desk and scribbled something on a sheet of paper. Then, "Give me that I.O.U.!" he said. "*And* the two thousand."

"But what guarantee . . . ?" I began.

"My word—my spoken word. More than that I can't give you. And remember—if *they* catch you, you've a lot to lose. All the memories, all the habits, all the personal idiosyncracies that make you *you*. And you wouldn't want that, would you? Exile to Centaurus Fifth is better than Earth as a synthetic

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personality manufactured by the pen-psychs."

He was right. I gave him the two thousand—I gave him the I.O.U. He scrawled *Paid* across it, initialed it. He said, "Take it back. Get your fingerprints over it. Twist it up—that's right. Now drop it carelessly. You owed me that money over the Round-the-Moon Stakes—remember?

"Now—go first of all to Hornchurch—the top address on this piece of paper. There's a man there, keeps an antique shop. Ask him if he has any early twentieth-century poker-work pipe-racks with matching pipes.

"He won't have but he'll ask you into the back room. It'll probably cost you another five hundred at least. Go to Heston, next. Take the next stratoliner to Sydney—and that's the second address . . ."

It didn't seem much for two thousand. I told him so and he said if I wasn't satisfied he'd put through a call to the police. So there wasn't much that I could do about it.

I found the shop at Hornchurch. It occupied, fittingly, the lower floor of an old-fashioned concrete building that looked startlingly out of place among its plastic and aluminum neighbors. The owner of the shop was a little rat of a man, dirty and untidy and generally unprepossessing, but he asked no questions. When I put my query to him he just said I might find what I wanted in the back room, called an assistant to take charge of the shop and accompanied me to the rear of the premises.

He didn't do much for his five hundred. All he gave me was a change of clothing, two contact lenses that turned my eyes from blue to a sort of brown, a pair of shoes that added another two inches to my height.

Oh—and there was the matter of the hair-dye and the wallet stuffed with all kinds of papers that made me out to be a wool merchant making a business trip to Westralia. Luckily I have a brother in that trade and from him, thanks to a retentive memory, enough knowledge of textiles to deceive anybody not an expert.

When I got to Heston there were police around the ticket offices, police watching the embarkation of passengers aboard each outward-bound stratoliner. In spite of my disguise I felt utterly naked and helpless.

And then, while I was still hanging indecisively around the waiting room, pretending an interest in the books and magazines on display on the newsstand, there was a scuffle at the window of the Far East booking-office. It was a woman they caught—a big brassy blonde.

I never found out what they wanted her for. But on top of my relief my commonsense told me that *they* wouldn't be after me until the examiners went through my books. I still had a few hours of grace.

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I was lucky. There was one berth unreserved in the Sydney stratoliner. The next ship would not leave until the following morning—and that would have been cutting things a little too fine. One berth and the liner was lifting in ten minutes. I had my foot on the bottom step of the gangway when I realised that I had no baggage. The man in the antique shop should have thought of that.

Anyhow I had time to nip back to the waiting room, to dive into the shop that catered to the needs of absent-minded or badly-rushed travelers. I bought myself a cheap compressed pulp suitcase, pajamas, toothbrush, toothpaste, a tube of Smoothex and a change of shirts. The Smoothex was really the most important. A blond beard with dark hair would have looked odd—not unnatural but odd enough to arouse the interest of the steward.

When I jumped aboard the ship little whisps of blue smoke were already trickling from the venturis. As I settled into my seat I heard the wheeled gangway being pulled away from the entrance port, heard the door slammed and dogged tight shut.

As I lit a cigarette the ship started to move and the tilt of the deck, forcing me back into the padded seat, told me that she was lifting into the London sky.

I looked through the port at my side. The city was sliding past below, the buildings gleaming pallidly among the dark green of the parks, the first lights already twinkling along the broad avenues and on the Thames Embankment. Like a great wave the dusk was washing in from the east. Then, as we gained altitude, I saw the last tip of the sun's upper limb climb briefly above the long low line of the hills to the westward—climb, then vanish as our brief respite from the onrushing darkness was ended.

It all looked too good to leave. What if the penal psychologists did give me a fresh personality? What did it matter? Some part of the essential *I* would surely remain, would survive to appreciate and enjoy the familiar scenes among which I had been reared. Centaurus V could offer nothing like this.

Its cities, set among the wild rugged mountains of Van Huyten's Land, along the steamy beaches of the MacLean Coast, were too new, without history, lacking the smooth warm comfort that comes with maturity. There and then I decided to take the next ship back from Australia. I would give myself up and take whatever was coming to me.

But London was gone, England was gone, below us was one vast sheet of uniform cloud, above us the stars, bright, unwinking, set in the black sky. I reminded myself there was the little matter of two-and-a-half thousand credits already expended, to say nothing of the outlay on suitcase and traveling gear. I like to get value for my money.

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If I didn't like Centaurus V—well, the ships ran both ways.

The dinner gong was sounded then and we all got up from our seats and filed down to the dining saloon. They put me at a table with a middle-aged man and two rather charming girls. At any other time I should have liked to have got to know those girls better. As it was I couldn't risk it. They must have thought me an unsociable type, hurrying through my meal with my nose buried in one of the magazines I had picked up at the airport.

After coffee I went up to the next deck again. The stewards had not yet finished the minor magic by which they transformed rows of cushioned seats into curtained bunks. So I went to the bar and treated myself to a double whisky. The barman was inclined to be talkative but I feigned a slight air-sickness. When I left at last I had told him nothing but he had told me at least seven different ways of dealing with that malady.

And then, behind the curtains of my bunk, snug and secure under the electrically warmed blanket, I felt really safe at last. It would be evening again when we arrived at Sydney—evening in New South Wales but only early morning in England. I would still have a few hours grace before the examiners started to find the discrepancies in my books, before the hunt was up.

And in that time . . . .

And in that time I found the second address the man in Southend had given me. It was another antique shop. Its windows were filled with a display of boomerangs, woomerahs and other aboriginal weapons. There were one or two ship's bells—ORION was the name on one of them and it struck me as being rather apt—that had presumably belonged to long-since broken-up surface liners on the Australian trade.

There were opals, alive with shifting polychromatic light, in ancient gold and silver settings. There were weapons I thought at first were heavy blasters but which I identified after a few moments' inspection as twentieth century revolvers and automatic pistols.

But what was I to do? Who was I to ask for? My friend in London hadn't told me. But—it was an antique shop of sorts. So I went inside, walked to the tall stooped old man behind the counter and asked him if he had any early twentieth-century poker-work pipe-racks.

He made a pretence of rummaging in a showcase on the counter and asked in a low voice if I was the young man from the bank. I hesitated—then told him that I was. While I was speaking the door opened again and somebody else, another man, came in. The shop-keeper, still fumbling in his show-case, said that if I cared to wait a few minutes he had some fifth-century work that might interest me.

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I looked at the new customer. I was afraid he might be an agent. But he didn't look like one. His jacket was stained and threadbare, his linen was filthy. He had a shifty hangdog air even the finest actor would find it next to impossible to reproduce faithfully.

And his eyes, glaring beneath the shaggy brows, were the eyes of a wild animal. He looked at me and appeared to ignore me—although his right hand strayed down to his pocket in a suggestive manner. And he asked the shopkeeper if he had any twentieth-century poker-work pipe-racks.

"And who sent *you?*" asked the man behind the counter.

"Roscommon. He told me you was ingenuous enough to . . ." Then, "Who's this?"

"Another customer after the same as yourself. Mr. . . ."

"Calthorpe," I told him.

". . . meet Mr. Jenkins. I've been expecting Mr. Jenkins along for many a month."

"That'll do," growled Jenkins. "There's no need to go all hysterical on us."

All this had me more than a little puzzled. The shopkeeper, so far as I could judge, seemed prone to neither ingenuousness nor hysteria. But I didn't know Jenkins then.

Outside it was now quite dark and the light of a street lamp shone through the shop windows, gleaming on the ancient weapons, striking glimmering uncanny fire from the opals. And the three of us stood there in the darkness, distrusting one another like three strange dogs undecided whether or not to fight.

The shopkeeper's hand strayed along his counter and from somewhere in the rear of the shop we heard the ringing of a bell. Jenkins swore and his right hand came out of his pocket. It held a knife. From the shadows behind the counter two forms silently materialised. Each held a shining object in his right hand that could have been an illegal blaster.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," said the shopkeeper. "I hadn't bargained on two of you at once, one of you Mr. Jenkins. I have to take my precautions."

Jenkins muttered something about eternal viridescence being the price of safety.

"Quite so. And now if you will both step round to my office we will discuss the matter of fifth-century work that I have already referred to . . ."

"Lead on, Macduff," said Jenkins.

It seems to me now that the cleverest part of the organisation in which we had become entangled was that its customers took most of the risks. There was, I suppose, a certain amount of bribery involved, a certain familiarity with the workings of airports and spaceports.

We, Jenkins and I, paid the antique dealer not so much for what he did as for what he knew. We also paid him—or a friend of his—for a Spurling Three that

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should have been on display in his window, a refugee from the junk pile if ever there was one.

The money we had to fork out would have purchased one of the very latest Spurling Sevens with h. and c. and every modern convenience. Luckily I can pilot a Spurling—and it was a good job that the antique man in Hornchurch had included a private pilot's license among the papers in the wallet he sold me.

Then we had to pay—but heavily—for the timetable and the map he sold us. It gave us the route to follow to Port Kingsford in Westralia, the location of the unmarked patch of desert where we were to land and destroy the Spurling, the trail to take to the spaceport.

There was the exact time that we were to stroll on to the landing field, the compartment aboard the ship, STARMAIDEN, in which we were to hide ourselves. There was, I suppose, some first-class staff-work there—but five thousand credits was a lot to pay for it, to say nothing of another thousand for the flying garbage can.

Oh, well—give the devil his due. He threw in some advice and information free, gratis and for damn-all. "You're going to see a lot of Malaprop Jenkins," he told me. "Yes—and hear a lot. It's a long way to Centaurus Fifth, Mannschen Drive notwithstanding.

"There'll be the two of you in the ship and after you give yourselves up to the Captain—who'll be expecting you—he'll almost certainly berth you together. The cargo liners don't have much in the way of spare accommodation. You'll find friend Jenkins' misuse of words a bit boring after a while. Or you might even find it funny.

"Whichever way it is—don't let him see it. He's very sensitive. The Feds are after him for two crimes—robbery with violence and carving his girlfriend because she laughed when he told her—she was all dressed up to kill—that fine feathers make fine brides."

"She should have cut *him* dead after that effort," I told him.

"Now don't *you* start. I've no responsibility for you whatsoever—all that I've done is sell you a secondhand Spurling through my cousin. But I don't like to see people remade by the pen-psychs—to my way of thinking it's worse than the death penalty. It happened to a friend of mine—if you *must* know, a girl I was rather fond of. They reckoned she was anti-social. And I don't want to see you murdered by Jenkins.

"It's a pity that you'll be in the same ship but it couldn't be avoided. Frankly I'd have let *him* take what was coming to him—but once you're mixed up in this racket there's no backing out. Well, you have your charts and your timetable. Don't drop me a line from Centaurus Five—the fewer clues the better—but if you like you can call in and see"—he gave me a scrap of paper—"this friend

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of mine in Port Phillips. Memorize the address and destroy the paper."

That was that. Jenkins was waiting in the Spurling when I got to the municipal airfield. I climbed carefully into the cockpit, more than half afraid that the crazy crate would collapse around my ears. But except for some ominous creakings all seemed to be well.

I waited until the traffic controller gave me the green light, then lifted her on her turret-drive. The jets fired sweetly and cleanly and in next to no time we had reached the thousand-foot level. I set the course as per instructions for Auckland.

Fifty miles out over the Tasman Sea I brought her round, swung her in a great arc so as to pass well to the north of Sydney. Something big passed overhead, well above the clouds, and we heard the noise of its jets. We didn't see it and it probably didn't see us—except as an insignificant not-to-be-bothered-with luminous speck on its radar screen.

The night came sweeping down almost before we made the land and the greater part of our flight was made over featureless darkness. The antique dealer had routed us well, clear of every town and village. The actual steering of the Spurling I left to the automatic pilot, busying myself with radio cross-bearings.

Jenkins, except for the time that he said that he was interested in astrology and asked me to identify the constellation of O'Brien, was silent. At last, according to my latest fix, we had a scant thirty miles to go to the place where we were to land. According to my watch, we were running on time. . I felt very pleased with myself and thought of sending my log in to Headquarters—then remembered with a shock that whatever happened I had forfeited my commission in the Federal Air Force Reserve.

Rather glumly I cut the drive to a mere trickle of power, eased the old Spurling down on her turret-drive. I couldn't use landing lights or flares—all that I had to work on was the dial of the radio altimeter. At five hundred feet I was apprehensive. At three hundred I was in a cold sweat.

At one hundred there was a splintering crash as the ancient undercarriage met the hard sand that, according to the lying altimeter, was all of thirty-three-and-a-third yards below. The poor old Spurling sat down hard, fell over on her side, collapsed. She would never fly again.

That didn't worry me. What did worry me—after the misbehavior of one important instrument—was the possibility of considerable error in my last radio bearings. But I needn't have worried. I needn't have troubled to get out the little magnetic compass with which we had been supplied.

The lights of Port Kingsford glowed like a pale impossible dawn

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over the desert rim, a glow that seemed to be creeping up to engulf the stars of the Cross and Alpha and Beta Centauri, riding low in the black sky over the pallid radiance from the spaceport.

"Well," I said, "we're here."

Jenkins clambered out of the wreckage. He reminded me that it was many a step 'twixt the cup and the lip. And it did look like a long walk. But before we started out there was one thing left to do. There was an innocent-looking little switch on the dashboard. I pressed it down. After a certain interval —long or short I didn't know—the time fuse would do its work and the poor old Spurling would be no more than a puddle of fused metal on the sand. My companion said that he'd often wondered how Caesar's army managed to march after they'd burned their boots.

It was cold and we could have done with a light to help us over the rough terrain but we made good time. We circled the port so as to approach from the south. When the thermite bomb went we could see the point of this. It made quite a racket and a ruddy flare that must have been visible for miles.

We saw a certain flashing of lights around the administration buildings and heard a steady diminishing drone as a helicopter took off to investigate. It was then that I started to have misgivings. If Port Kingsford carried any aboriginal trackers on its payroll the game would be up. But Port Captains aren't policemen and presumably the organization knew what it was doing.

Nobody stopped us when we walked onto the landing field. There was some activity on its northern edge—the conveyor belts were steadily pouring freight into a big cargo liner. That would be STARMAIDEN. Loading was scheduled to be completed at 0600. At 0630 there would be nobody aboard but the officer of the watch.

At 0645 he would come ashore and walk across to the administration buildings to get the figures from the stevedore. At 0730, approximately, he and the other officers and crew would return on board and prepare for blasting off. And by this time Jenkins and I would be snugly hidden in the control-room spares-locker.

We had half an hour or so to waste. We kept as much as possible to the shadows thrown by the buildings by the tall monolithic ships. We watched the passengers filing up the gangway of a huge Venus-bound transport. Government-assisted emigrants they must have been and they were burdened with all kinds of incongruous junk in addition to their cheap and battered baggage.

One woman, I remember, was clutching to her bosom what looked like a potted aspidistra. I was tempted to join them—then saw that there were far too many uniformed officials at both ends of the long gangway.

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Jenkins went all philosophical and whispered in a hoarse voice, "There they go with all their goods and shackles . . ." In a way he was right. People do chain themselves to useless inanimate objects.

All the time we were working ourselves closer to STARMAIDEN. She had finished loading now and we saw the big cargo ports being shut and sealed, the spidery conveyor belts being dismantled. We saw the stevedores pouring ashore from her main airlock.

Then a single uniformed figure came out after them, turned to look briefly up at his ship, strode briskly across the fused sand to the administration buildings. We started forward—then held back. There was one man still by the gangway—evidently some kind of a watchman.

He stamped about as if to drive the cold from his feet. He looked guiltily around, then pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. But there was too much wind where he was standing for him to get a light. He slid swiftly round to the lee of the ship to light up in comfort.

We didn't wait for the flare of his match. We ran across the stretch of illuminated ground, feeling terribly naked and conspicuous in the glare of STARMAIDEN's floodlights. We clambered up the gangway into the airlock, into the ship. Now Jenkins was on strange territory—but I found my Air Force Reserve training stood me in good stead.

It's only Air Force training—but officers are expected to have some slight smattering of spacemanship. During one annual drill I rode the Earth-Moon ferry in the control-room of a Lunar Metals freighter—as a very supernumerary officer. But it was all coming in useful now.

With Jenkins following I made straight for the control-room. The locker was there, as we had been told, hard by the hatch through which we had come from the body of the ship. It didn't look too big. It didn't look any bigger than a coffin—and it was much the same shape. But it was almost empty.

It held the two of us easily and not too uncomfortably. I could see that once acceleration started our hip-bones were going to dig holes for themselves in the hard plastic of the locker bottom—but we shouldn't have to put up with that for long. Once the Martellis were cut and the ship switched over to the Mannschen Drive there would be no turning back. We could come out then.

We got into the box.

"Snug as bugs in a jug," commented Jenkins. He put another syllable on the end of "bugs." But that kind of thing didn't matter—not then. We lay there for eternities, wanting to smoke, wanting to sneeze, straining our ears for the sound of feet on the ladder which would mean that Captain, Chief Pilot and Navigator were coming

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to their stations. At last, by means of a fine piece of contortionism, I managed to look at my watch. It was 0715, Westralian Time.

"They won't be long," I whispered.

Then at last there was a sound. It wasn't the friendly clatter of feet on ladders. It was eerie, spine-chilling, washing through the control room in waves of pure terror. It was the Port Kingsford alarm siren. Jenkins cursed, threw back the lid of the locker, jumped out. His knife glimmered in his hand.

I followed him. It was almost day now and the pallid grey light of dawn streamed in through the control room viewports. From our vantage point we could see figures running towards the ship from all sides. We looked up—and there was a big police ship just coming in for a landing.

There was only one thing to do. I did it. I ran to the control-panel, threw the switch that would close our airlock doors. I started our own siren—and if people didn't keep clear of backblast that'd be their funeral. I looked at the other controls, trying hard to remember. I did remember.

The roar of the Martellis as they opened up was frightening, deafening. I almost cut the drive—then realised that this wasn't one of the toy rockets of the Lunar Ferry. We lifted. Jenkins screamed and pointed. I looked up—and it seemed that we were flying into a stream of flame. There was a vast black shape, looming closer and closer. It was right on top of us.

Then . . .

Then there was only the sky ahead, black, sprinkled with blazing stars.

"My God," said Jenkins. "The police-ship!"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "But there was no shock . . ."

"We was going too fast."

He walked to the nearest viewport, looked out. He walked back again hastily to the center of the control room. I piled on another two G's acceleration. He sat down —hard. Then, "Can you take us to Centaurus?"

"I don't know. I'm not a Master Astronaut."

"But the Spurling. And this . . ."

"I was qualified to fly the Spurling. This is just luck. If my memory holds out I can manage planetary takeoffs and landings. But navigation is beyond me. And I know nothing of the Interstellar Drive."

"There're books." He grabbed three in one huge paw from the Nagivator's book rack. "You don't have to be a Master Astrologer to read, do you?"

"What do you want me to do? Cast a horoscope?"

"What was that?" He played with his knife, looked as though he might turn nasty.

"Oh, nothing. I'll give it a go."

So I gave it a go. I let her run until we had reached escape velocity, then cut the Martellis. I went down

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to look at the Mannschen Drive. There didn't seem to be much to it—just a mess of wheels at all kinds of odd angles. But it wasn't working then . . .

I ploughed through all the textbooks and such that I could lay my hands on. I may have been wrong but it seemed to me that the best policy was to swing her on her gyroscopes until her nose was pointing straight for Alpha Centauri. A ticklish job—but accomplished at last. I didn't know if there was anything in front of us but the way we were going took us well clear of the Plane of the Ecliptic.

Well, I got her lined up and then switched over to the Mannschen. I don't know what I expected—but the only immediate result was a deep drone, sliding rapidly up the octaves to a shrill whine as all those blasted wheels started spinning.

We didn't feel anything or see anything. Jenkins, I know, had the idea that Alpha Centauri was going to expand at once from a pinpoint of light to a visible disc. He was very disappointed. He asked me how it worked.

I told him I didn't know. I told him I *thought* we were going astern in Time as we went ahead in Space, that the actual math of it all was way beyond me.

"Oh," he grunted. "Sort of a step in Time saves nine in Space?"

"Sort of . . ." I admitted

"Can't we—go faster?"

"I suppose we might. But it would mean switching off the Mannschen, working up more speed with the Mantellis, falling free again, then cutting in the Mannschen with the rockets off. As far as I can gather any change of mass with the Mannschen Drive running leads to disastrous results."

"I see," He didn't. "But we're eating, drinking, breathing and so on . . ."

"All changes on the molecular level. And the ship is a closed economy. Nothing is being lost. If I switch on the Martellis mass would be changed into energy and *some* balance, *somewhere,* would be upset."

"I see," he said.

Well, for about ten days we fell silently through Space. It seemed to us that there was some slight shift in the configuration of the constellations and certainly our own Sun was no more than another star among the countless stars astern of us.

Alpha Centauri may have been expanding ever so slightly—but I could never find out how to use the instruments in the control-room. I had, as I said before, a rough grounding in interplanetary navigation but this interstellar stuff was black magic.

And the Mannschen Drive was black magic too. I went down quite often to look at it, although I knew that it wasn't—healthy. All those spinning wheels, with the biggest one of all that was all the time precessing, tilting, tilting,

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dragging the eye with it, dragging the mind with it, back, back . . .

It was all wrong, somehow. It wasn't natural. For two pins I'd have stopped it there and then, even though it meant dying of senile decay a bare decimal of the distance from Earth to Centaurus V.

On the eleventh day it happened. I was sleeping, and Jenkins came and called me. He was in a panic. There was a ship, he said, astern, overhauling us fast. So I got out of the Captain's bunk and, still feeling vague and dim, followed him up to Control. He was right. The screens showed a ship. She was, according to our radar, only fifty miles distant. Even as we watched, that distance was decreased by a mile, two miles, three . . .

Of course, extradition or no extradition, they were bound to be after us. Piracy is recognized as a crime by all worlds, by all nations. And the hunk of property to which we had helped ourselves was big enough to leave an appreciable gap in the economies of both the Solar and Centaurian Unions.

Still—I didn't share Jenkins' apprehension. A little knowledge may have been a dangerous thing—but I couldn't see how our pursuers, short of opening fire with everything they had and blasting us into eternity, could do anything about catching us. True, they could grapple and board—if the rates of temporal precession of the two ships matched to a split microsecond. And that was a million-to-one chance.

I strapped myself into the Pilot's chair, looked at the instruments in front of me, drove my sleep-befogged brain to formulate some plan of action. Something had to be done about it. The pursuing ship, even though she might be reluctant to destroy several million credits worthy of property, would be an uncomfortable sort of traveling companion.

If I stop the Mannschen, I remember thinking, *and then cut loose with the Martellis, John Willy will have his work cut out to locate us again.*

"Forty miles!" screamed Jenkins. He reached across me, threw the switch of the rocket motors. The sudden acceleration slammed him down on the deck. The radar screen came alive with rippling spirals of livid flame. The stars, the cold fixed stars shining through our viewports, wheeled and coruscated crazily.

"You fool!" I shouted.

It was hard to raise my hand against the weight of our acceleration. But I managed it. My fingers closed over the switch. There was a brief sputtering arc as I opened it. Then silence, ominous and deathly after the short-lived thunder of the Martellis, fell like a thick, muffling blanket. Silence? Not quite.

As our ears recovered from their shock we heard the shrill almost supersonic whine of the Mannschen Drive. I thought I'd better cut it, try to get some kind of bearings

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and start again from scratch. I cut it. It would take time, I told myself, for all those spinning wheels to come to rest. I was still telling myself that half an hour later.

I went down to the Mannschen Drive room then. I pulled fuses, I cut cables. I even, at the finish, tried to poke a steel bar into that whirling complexity but there seems to be some kind of field around it and nothing can be done to it. It goes on, whining away to itself with a complete disregard for anything I may do.

But for awhile we still thought we were heading for Centaurus V. The queer behavior of the Drive would make landing rather a problem—when we came to it. But we hadn't yet come to it. There should be time—there *must* be time—between Position X and the Centaurian System to get things under control. I spent most of my time working on the Drive, leaving Jenkins to keep a lookout of sorts in Control.

I must have ripped out every inch of wiring between the control room and the Drive unit. I soon had the interior of the ship looking as though some demented spider with a lead-and-copper metabolism had been running wild. There had to be some power lead that I hadn't found . . . But there wasn't.

And then Jenkins came scrambling down. We were there, he cried. We'd made it. I didn't see how this could be—the last time that I'd been up to the greenhouse the stars ahead had still been mere points of light and Alpha Centauri no closer to showing as a disc than ever it had.

But we were coming in stern first, said Jenkins. Stern first? Had he managed to swing her? Surely I'd have known—and in any case I didn't think that the gyroscopes could possibly work after the mess into which I'd reduced the wiring.

But there was a planet, bawled Jenkins. A whacking great planet, showing up on the screens as large as life and twice as mutual.

So I put down my tools and followed him back to Control. There, right ahead—fixed, steady—were the stars of Cross and Centaur, just as you can see them on any clear night from Earth's Southern Hemisphere. And there—a black-and-white picture on the screen—right astern was a great globe. It was expanding fast. Its pattern of cloud and sea and land swelled as though painted on the surface of a child's toy balloon.

I didn't forget that the Drive was still running. I just didn't care. I got the Martellis going—thanking my lucky stars I hadn't succeeded in severing their control cables. But although acceleration pressed us down, although the whole ship vibrated to their thunder, they seemed utterly powerless to check our headlong plunge. What mass could this strange, impossible world have—what gravity?

And what was it like? What did it remind me of? What *was* it?

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The roughly rectangular island continent to which we were falling expanded until it filled the screen. Details were becoming visible now —a stretch of arid desolation, a huddle of buildings, the tall shapes of ships . . .

And there was a ship blasting off, rising, rising, right into the torrent of atomic flame from our jets. Closer it came, and closer. Its dark onrushing mass filled the screen. We braced ourselves for the shock . . .

Then the screen was blank—no world, no landing-field, no ship.

Nothing.

"I tell you what," Jenkins says to me every so often, "It's one of them paradises."

If one insists on semantic accuracy it's not—it's getting too close to the very reverse for comfort. But it could be worse. On the homeward semicircle we don't experience any horrors such as regurgitation, talking backwards, falling up and getting down and all the rest of it. Life to us is—normal.

And I'm not sure that living backwards is such a drawback—it means our food supply is inexhaustible. Air and water—thanks to the closed economy of a space-ship—are practically inexhaustible. And I suppose that we shall be able to use our hydroponics tanks for something else besides air conditioning.

Still—we have our freedom, such as it is. Nothing we do on the molecular level can possibly have any effect—we can eat, drink, kill each other—and the total mass of the ship remains unchanged. And on the atomic level all we are able to do is accelerate the cycle. There we have both loss of mass and increase of energy.

I'm more than half afraid to fire the Martellis any more—I can't help remembering the absurd story about the bird that flew in ever decreasing circles until it vanished. It all links up with what Jenkins insists on calling the Lorenz-Fitzgerald Contradiction. But I'll give it a go some time—if there is such a thing as Time any longer . . .

There's something else to try first. A little thing, easily done, that could perhaps just throw the infernal cycle out of gear—a change of mass with no increase of energy, a killing of two birds with one stone as it were. I'm going to put this message into a bottle—we have any amount of empties now.

When next we approach Port Kingsford I'm going out into the airlock and I'm going to throw the bottle out as hard as I can. It may stay in the same field as the ship. It may not. It may tell the Feds and the Centurian Corporation what's happened to STARMAIDEN —or it may intrigue some archaeologist of the remote future. It may even startle our ancestors!

But all that's of minor importance.

What is important is anything, *anything*, that could conceivably get us out of this sticky web of paradoxes, this viscous circle.

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little men of space

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

The children were very young—and the crisis they were called upon to face would have driven most adults into a straitjacket.

THE CHILDREN WERE coming home. Elwood could see them from the cottage doorway, shouting and rejoicing in the bright October sunlight. They carried lunch baskets and—as they came tripping toward him across the lawn—he was ready to believe that nothing in life could be quite as enchanting as the simple wonder of childhood itself with its light-hearted merriment and freedom from care.

He was ready to forget the laundry bills and the scuffed shoes, the father-and-son problems, all the tormenting lesser difficulties which could demolish parenthood as an exact science and turn it into a madcap adventure without rhyme or reason.

Mary Anne was in the lead. She squealed with delight when she caught sight of her father's entranced face, as if by some miracle he had become all at once a gift-bestowing snowman quite as remarkable as the hollow dolls, one within the other, which she had received from him as a goodwill offering on her last birthday.

Eleven-year-old Melvin was more circumspect. In his son's eyes John Elwood represented all the real values of life in so far as they

As befits a former protégé of the late great Howard Phillips Lovecraft, Mr. Long is a master of the horror story. More, he is well aware that the deepest terror may not always stem from the infinitely large. Sometimes the infinitely small can be even worse.

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could be translated into model locomotives and bridge-building sets. But he knew his father to be a man of dignity who could not be easily cajoled. It was best to let his sister try first and when she failed . . .

For an instant as he stared Elwood found himself secretly envying his son. At a quarter past eleven Melvin had a firm grasp of elementary physics. His feet were firmly planted on the ground and he wasn't serious-minded enough yet to make the tragic mistakes that come with adult unsureness.

Not the kind of mistakes which he, James Seaton Elwood, had made with the moon rocket, for instance. Or the mistake which he was making now by whimsically comparing the ages of his son and daughter to the moving hands of a clock.

How absurd it was to think of Mary Anne as a quarter-past seven when her budding feminine intuition made her as ageless as the Sphinx. All children were ageless really and it was absurd to imagine that they could be made to conform to any logical frame of reference, scientific or otherwise.

Children were illogically imaginative, with a timelessness which gave them an edge on adults when it came to solving problems that required a fresh approach to reality. What was it Wordsworth had said? *Trailing clouds of glory . . .*

"Daddy, Mr. Rayburn let us out early—so we could have a picnic. It would have been fun if Melvin hadn't spoiled everything. He ate up all of the peanut butter sandwiches himself."

"Tattle tale!"

"He got in a fight too. Freddy Mason didn't want to fight but Melvin started it!"

"I *did*n't!"

"You *did!* You know you did!"

"That's a lie!"

Elwood lowered his eyes and saw that both of his children were now as close to him as they could ever be. Mary Anne was tugging at his sleeve, begging him to take her part, and Melvin was appealing to him in man-to-man fashion, his contemptuous masculinity acting as a foil to his sister's feminine wiles.

It was a grave crisis and Elwood recognized it as such. Ordinarily he would have shunned a cut-and-dried solution but for once he had no choice.

When children fall out, when you are backed into a corner and your authority totters, there is only one sure way to save yourself—*Occupy their minds with something else.*

"You're spoiling the surprise, kiddies," Elwood said, striving to sound embittered. "It's been a lonesome hard day for me but I kept telling myself you'd soon be home to share my triumph. I suppose I shouldn't say this—but your mother just doesn't understand me the way you do."

"What is it, daddy?" Mary Anne asked, a sudden warm solicitude in her gaze.

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"Yeah, Pop, tell us!" Melvin chimed in.

"The rocket is just about completed," Elwood said.

He felt Mary Anne's hand tighten on his sleeve and realised with elation that she was a scientist's daughter to her fingertips. He was gratified quite as much by the sudden hiss of Melvin's indrawn breath.

"Come along—I'll show you!" he said.

Elwood derived the most intense pleasure from showing groups of visiting dignitaries—scientific big shots for the most part—through his basement laboratory. But when the dignitaries happened to be his own children his elation knew no bounds.

Down the basement stairs they trooped, Melvin to the right of him, Mary Anne to the left. A door opened with a gentle click, a light came on and Melvin let out a yell which resounded through the house.

"You've got the blast reflector set up. *Pop!*"

The rocket stood out, silver on black at its base, with a dull shine where it tapered to catch and hold the light.

It was not large as rockets go. It was barely five feet in height, a miracle of technical craftsmanship wrought by the unerring skill and scientific knowhow of a very practical man with a family to support. But it had been built with an eye to beauty as well and as the light glimmered and danced on its sloping vanes it seemed as gracefully poised for flight as some half-mythical bird cast in metal by a long-vanished elfin race.

As gracefully poised and as shiningly beautiful . . . .

It was Mary Anne who broke the spell. "Daddy, will it really go to the moon?"

Elwood looked down at his daughter and patted her tousled red-gold hair. "How many times must I tell you it isn't an experimental model?" he chided. "It was designed for actual space flight."

"But daddy—"

"If you've any more silly notions you'd better get rid of them right now. You may never get another chance. Yesterday Melvin and I discussed the details as fellow-scientists. Suppose you tell her just how much the Government is contributing, son."

"Forty thousand dollars!" Melvin said promptly, rolling the figure over his tongue as though it had some mysterious magic of its own which could elevate him to man's estate—if he repeated it often enough.

"A research grant," Elwood added as if thinking aloud for his own benefit. "I had a tough time persuading them to let me do all the construction work right here in my own laboratory. I've probably cut more yards of official red tape than any odd duck since Achimedes."

He smiled a little ruefully. "In case you're interested—I've had to

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pay through the nose for the technical assistance I've been getting. Those owl-faced characters you've seen drifting in and out won't work for peanuts."

"But all of the rockets in the stereo-cineramas are much bigger!" Mary Anne protested. "Why is that, daddy?"

"We've just about seen the end of the huge outmoded, stratosphere observation-type rockets," Elwood replied, including both children in his glance. "In the future observation rockets will be much smaller and there is little to be gained by attempting to send a large rocket to the moon. The cost would be a thousand times as great."

"But daddy, how could such a little rocket ever get as far as the moon."

"Perhaps the worst mistake an individual or a society can make is to confuse size with power," Elwood said. "There is a tiny bee which, in proportion to its size, can travel faster than our cleverest flight specialists in their jet planes."

"But daddy—"

"Don't look so incredulous, honeybunch. You remind me of your mother. Melvin knows just how much progress we've made in atomic research since Eniwetok. Tell her, son."

"The primitive hydrogen bomb tested at Eniwetok laid the groundwork for the storage of vast amounts of nuclear power in blast compartments a few inches square," Melvin said pridefully. "We can now power a very small rocket designed for space flight with the equivalent of fifty million tons of TNT."

"You left out one vital consideration, Melvin," Elwood said. "The automatic-control factor."

"Pop's right," Melvin said, confronting his sister almost accusingly. "The power won't be released all at once."

"It will be released in successive stages," Elwood corroborated. "We hope eventually to regulate the stages—or steps, as they are called—in such a way that other rockets, identical in design, will build up velocities approaching the speed of light."

Elwood picked up an odd-looking instrument from the work-bench against which he had been leaning. As he fingered it idly he enjoyed his daughter's stunned acceptance of his accomplishment, realising more than ever what an important contribution he had made to man's eventual conquest of the stars.

That conquest would come in good time. Even now enough atomic potential had been stored in the rocket to carry it to Alpha Centauri—and back. The blast mechanism had to have an overload to function at all. But only a tiny fraction of the potential would be needed to make the moon flight an accomplished fact.

The rocket wouldn't be traveling at anything like the speed of light. But just as soon as a few more

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complicated technical details had been worked out . . .

Elwood felt suddenly very tired. His back ached with stiffness and his eyelids throbbed. Fortunately he knew the reason for his weariness and refused to become alarmed. He had simply been driving himself too hard. But with the rocket so near completion he couldn't afford to let even a draft of cold wind blow upon him and increase his chances of becoming really ill.

"If it's all right with you, kiddies," he said, "I'm going upstairs to bed. I'm practically out on my feet."

"Aw, Pop, it isn't six o'clock yet!" Melvin protested.

Instantly Mary Anne came to his rescue. "Daddy, you're not getting enough rest!" she said, her eyes darting to the rocket and then to her brother in fierce reproach.

"I ought to turn in early when I can," Elwood said. "If your mother wasn't at Aunt Martha's I'd have to sit up half the night convincing her I've got enough practical sense left to shave and bathe myself and take in the mail."

"Goodnight, daddy!" Mary Anne said.

"Goodnight, kids. Thanks for being patient and giving me a break."

"Pop, can I stay down here and look it over?"

"Sure, Melvin, stay as long as you like. I don't mind your puttering around a bit with the tools so long as you don't touch the rocket." Elwood's face grew suddenly strained. "Promise me you won't."

"He won't!" Mary Anne promised.

She waited for her father's footsteps to echo hollowly on the floor above before she turned her ire full upon Melvin. "If I was a boy I'd be more considerate of daddy than you are!" she exclaimed, accusingly. "You don't care how tired he gets."

"You're not a boy," Melvin retorted. "You never could be. What's the sense in fooling yourself?"

"You just repeat everything he tells you," Mary Anne flared. "You're not so smart!"

"I'm smart enough to know that rocket could be sent further than the moon—right now."

Mary Anne gasped. "You're crazy. Daddy knows what he's doing."

"Sure he does. If he sent it as far as it could go it would disappear in space. He couldn't prove anything and he'd be in real trouble. They'd say he got rid of it because it wouldn't work and kept the forty thousand dollars for himself."

"The Earth-child is right!" a tiny voice said. "That rocket can and must carry us to our home planet. It is our last remaining hope."

For an instant Melvin felt as if he had swallowed a goldfish. Something flopped in his throat, coldly and horribly, and though the voice rang clear in his ears it seemed to come from deep inside his head.

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"He hears us!" the voice said. "Before he sees us we'd better train the beam on him. All Earth-children are emotional but the males are the hardest to control."

It was Mary Anne who screamed in protest. She stood as if frozen, staring down with swiftly widening eyes at the three tiny men who had come striding into the room through the wall. They had come in with a blaze of light behind them, a shimmering of the wall itself that seemed to go right through to the other side.

Mary Anne could have crushed them simply by raising her foot and bringing it down dead center above them. But their eyes warned her to be still.

Do not scream again, Earth-child, the eyes warned. *We are not as ugly as we seem to you and your fright is very distasteful to us.*

Horribly ugly they seemed to Mary Anne. They were no larger than the white ivory pawns on the chessboard in her father's library but they did not resemble pawns in the least. They were wrinkled and old-looking and the cheapest doll she had would have cried with shame to be dressed as they were.

She could have made out of an old handkerchief a better dress, with more tucks and seams to it—and no Jack-in-the-Box could have popped up to shiver and sway with such toothless, evil-eyed malice.

A child can escape from a monster of the toymaker's craft simply by drawing a line between the real and the imaginary. But Mary Anne could not escape from the little men facing her. There was no line to be drawn and she knew it.

The little men were alive, and they were staring at her now as she had never been stared at before. As if she were a stick of wood about to be thrown into a blazing fire which had been kindled for Melvin as well.

Totally bald they were, with skins so shriveled that their small, slitted eyes were buried in a maze of wrinkles. Most pitiful of all was the fact that their skins were mottled brown and green—colors so enchanting when associated with budding leaves or the russet-and-gold splendors of an autumn landscape.

The little men were alive and they were warning her to be quiet. Just to make sure that she would not move or attempt to scream again they spoke to her again inside her head.

"We're going to use the beam on you too. But you won't be hurt if you don't try to wake up your father."

She could hardly keep from screaming when she saw what they were doing to her brother. The tallest of the three—they were not all of the same height—was turning Melvin slowly about in a blaze of light.

He was the thinnest of the three too—so thin and tall that she automatically found herself thinking of

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him as Tall-Thin. The light came from a tiny glowing tube which Tall-Thin was clasping in hands as small and brightly shining as the penpoints in her school stationery set.

She knew by the way she felt that Melvin wanted to scream too —to scream and struggle and fight back. But he couldn't even move his head and shoulders. He was all stiffened up and he turned as she'd seen him do in dreams when they'd been quarreling and she had wanted to punish him for making faces at her—to punish him by skipping away across the room and laughing because he couldn't follow her.

She was sorry now she'd ever dreamed of Melvin in that way even when he was mean to her. She felt even sorrier when she heard her brother shriek. It wasn't much of a shriek—just a thin little cry that came out muffled.

Melvin had almost lost the power of speech and it was awful to watch him trying to move his lips. He was completely turned now, staring down at the little men, and his eyes were shrieking for him.

"Don't make them mad, Melvin!" Mary Anne pleaded. "They'll kill you."

Instantly Tall-Thin turned and trained his gaze on Mary Anne, his face twitching with impatience. "Dealing with the immature is a nuisance," he complained and Mary Anne heard the words clearly even though she knew they were not meant for her. Deep inside her head she could hear Tall-Thin speaking to his companions.

As if sensing something disturbing in that the second-tallest of the three spoke in reply—spoke for the first time. "They'll hear everything we say. It would be so much more convenient if we could talk to them without giving them the power to hear in return every word we utter."

"That cannot be avoided, Rujit," replied Tall-Thin. "When we read their minds we awaken extra-sensory faculties which would ordinarily remain dormant in them."

"And rudimentary."

"And rudimentary." Tall-Thin agreed. "It's like stimulating a low-grade energy circuit with a high-grade charge. The low-grade circuit will remain supercharged for a brief period."

"Would it not be safer to kill them at once?"

"Unnecessary killing is always unpleasant," Tall-Thin said.

"We should be emotionally prepared for it," Rujit countered. "We would not have survived and become great as a race if we had not conquered all such squeamishness in ourselves. We must be prepared to nullify all opposition by instant drastic action—the most drastic action available to us at any given time."

Rujit paused for an instant to transfix Tall-Thin with an accusing stare. Then he went on quickly, "In an emergency it is often very difficult to decide instantly how

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necessary an action may be. To take pleasure in killing unnecessarily is therefore a survival attribute of a very high order."

"I would as soon kill the Earth-children as not." Tall-Thin said. "But the slightest emotional unpleasantness militates against survival. Every act we perform must be dictated by reason. Our moral grandeur as a race is based on absolute logic—not on blind instinct. Even in an emergency *we* are wise enough to determine how necessary an action may be. So your argument falls to pieces."

Tall-Thin straightened, his parchment-dry face crinkling with rage. "This isn't the first time you've questioned my wisdom and authority, Rujit!" he said and his voice was like the hiss of a snake uncoiling in the long grass of a jungle clearing.

Rujit stiffened as if invisible fangs had buried themselves in his flesh. His cheeks could hardly have been called ruddy to begin with but their pallor suddenly became extreme. He took a quick step backward, a look of horror coming into his eyes.

"You *wouldn't!* No, *no,* Hilili!"

"The choice is no longer mine alone."

"But I was just thinking out loud!"

Tall-Thin clicked off the beam, leaving Melvin still standing large-eyed and motionless against the wall. He raised the tube which had projected the beam until it was pointing directly at Rujit.

"I'm going to step up the beam," he said.

"But why? *Why,* Hilili? For the love you bear me—"

"I bear you no love."

"But you are my biogenetic twin, Hilili. We have been closer than ordinary brothers from birth."

"It does not matter. It does not concern me. Family relationships militate against survival when reason falters in a single member of a family group."

Tall-Thin's voice hardened. "We came to this planet for one purpose—to colonize it for the good of all. We numbered thousands and now we are reduced to a pitiful remnant—just ourselves. Thanks to the stupidity of a few."

"I was never one of the stupid ones!" Rujit protested. "I advised our immediate return. The unknown and hideous diseases which decimated us like *migs,* the atmospheric gases which rotted our ships so insidiously that we were not aware of the damage until they exploded in flight—remember, I kept insisting that we could not survive such hazards for long!"

"Your sound judgment in that respect was more than offset by your wilful insistence we explore the entire planet," Tall-Thin countered. "Our ships were so numerous that they were observed in flight and we might have been destroyed completely when death and disaster struck.

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"As might have been expected the very shape of our ships made them conspicuous. Fiery disks they must have seemed to the Earth dwellers, so terrifying that they would have eventually found a way to fathom the mystery, and strike back. A perishing remnant of an advanced race has never yet succeeded in killing two billion primitives armed with Class C-type weapons."

"But how could I have known it then?"

"Ignorance is never an excuse!" Tall-Thin's voice was a merciless rasp. "A well-organized logical mind does not make such mistakes. Now we are facing utter disaster unless we can get back to our home planet and warn *The Twenty* that it would be sheer madness to attempt to colonize this planet again without better disease-preventing safeguards and atmosphere-resisting metals. Such safeguards can and must be worked out."

Tall-Thin paused, watching Melvin as if apprehensive that the praise he was about to bestow would be held against him to the detriment of his vanity.

"Unfortunately only two of us can go in this rocket, which has miraculously come into our possession. The primitive who constructed it, this Earth-child's progenitor, must have an almost Class B-type mind. Only two of us, understand?"

"But—"

"The survival of the wisest. I'm afraid I shall have to extinguish you, Rujit."

The tube lit up again, so brightly that Tall-Thin's hand was blotted out by the glare. Equally blotted out was Rujit's face but the rest of him did not vanish immediately. One arm disappeared but not the other—and there was a yawning dark gap between his knees and his waist.

It might not have seemed so horrible if Rujit had not shrieked first. The shriek had an outward-inward quality, echoing both inside the heads of the children and in the room as actual sound.

Even Tall-Thin seemed shaken by it, as if in a race that had outgrown the need for physical speech there could be nothing more unnerving than anguish so expressed.

Yet both the shriek and the almost instant blotting out of Rujit's face were eclipsed in point of horror by the fading of the little man's legs. They faded, kicking and protesting and spasmodically convulsed, faded in a ruby red glow that lingered for an instant in the still air like a slowly dissolving blood clot, then as slowly vanished.

It was at that moment Mary Anne ceased to think as a child. She dug her knuckles into her mouth to keep from screaming but the undaunted way in which her mind worked was a tribute to her forgetfulness of self. *If he should do that to Melvin!*

Tall-Thin must have sensed the loathing in her mind, for he turned

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with a grimace of rage and trained the beam full upon her, taking care however to alter the tube's destructive potential with a quick twist of his thumb.

"A primitive would have been solely tempted to kill you, Earth-child," he said. "Fortunately for you we have a high and undeviating code of ethics."

Back and forth over the children Tall-Thin played the beam, as if to make sure there would be no further unpleasantness from that source.

Then he clicked off the tube again, and turned to his remaining companion—a little man who apparently believed that silence and good order were the foundation of all things.

In a more primitive society he would have been considered a stooge but there appeared to be no such cultural concept in Tall-Thin's scale of values. He spoke with the utmost respect, as if anyone who agreed with him automatically became as exalted as himself.

"The primitive who constructed this rocket had a remarkable mind," he said. "*We* could not have constructed it for every culture, no matter how primitive, has resources peculiar to itself."

"That is very true, Hilili!"

Mary Anne tried to turn her head to look at Melvin but her neck felt as stiff as when she'd had the mumps and everyone had felt sorry for her. She was sure that the little men did not feel in the least sorry and all she could do was stare in helpless anger as they turned and scrambled into the rocket.

Finally she did manage to turn her head, just far enough to see what Melvin was doing.

Melvin wasn't moving at all. His head was lowered and he was thinking. She knew that he was thinking by the look in his eyes. Melvin was silently thinking and as she stared she ceased to be afraid.

She sat very still, waiting for Melvin to speak to her. Suddenly he did, deep inside her head.

The little men had come from far, far away. They had come from a big cloud of stars in the sky called the Great Nebula in Andromeda. Nearly everything in the universe curved and they had come spinning along the biggest curve of all in hundreds and hundreds of punched-out disks that glowed in the dark like Roman candles.

The cow pasture Melvin and she played in was—she knew what it was but she waited for Melvin to say it—rocket proving-ground. It was their own secret playing place but daddy called it a rocket proving-ground.

Daddy wouldn't send the rocket to the moon from his laboratory in the cellar. He'd take it out to the proving-ground and ask even the President of the United States to watch it start out for the Moon.

The President would come because her daddy was a very important and wonderful man. He didn't have much money but he'd

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be rich and famous if the rocket reached the moon.

Most men as wonderful as her daddy were poor until they did something to make people stand up and shout. The little men didn't want her daddy to become rich so that he could send Melvin through college and she could go to college too. The little men didn't want her to learn domestic housekeeping and make the handsomest man in all the world happy.

The little men wouldn't—couldn't—take the rocket out to the proving-ground. It would start off blazing and go straight up through the roof into the sky. It would blow the cellar apart and the cottage would come tumbling down in ruins. Melvin would be killed and her daddy . . .

She had never been so terrified in all her life and if Melvin hadn't started thinking she would have burst out crying.

Melvin was thinking something now about the cottage. Water came in from the sea. It did too—she remembered daddy complaining about it when he went down to stoke the furnace. Water in the cellar and the ground underneath all soft and soggy.

Salt-marsh seepage. Why, it was like quicksand down below the solid strata. The words came quick and clear from Melvin thinking. *Solid strata.* Even the solid strata wasn't all solid. There were *porosities* in it—like a sponge. If something very heavy went down through the cellar floor it would go right on sinking.

Auxiliary fuels, came from Melvin thinking. *They're in the auxiliary fuel-chamber now. Hot steam in the turbines, pushed right through the heat exchanger. The atomic charge won't go off at all if the heat exchanger works fast enough.*

They don't know as much about the rocket as Pop does, came from Melvin. *The atomic part is the big important part. They came at night and studied that. But the heat exchanger—they didn't take the trouble to study it. Now they're worried about it. Why should an atomic rocket have auxiliary fuels?*

Daddy could have told them. You had to have auxiliary fuels in a rocket if you were going to send it to the moon. The rocket's trajectory would have to be modified by small readjustments that could only be made by auxiliary fuels.

Melvin, think hard! Think hard and fast, and in the right way!

They're stopping now to puzzle it out, came from Melvin. *Their minds work differently from ours. They fasten on the big important things first. The small things they sometimes overlook. They can't help it. Their minds are constructed that way.*

Mustn't let trivialities distract us. That's what they were thinking. That's what they were thinking, and they were going to make a mistake.

They're going to move the wrong dial. I'm going to help them move

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the wrong dial. I want them to move the wrong dial. They must move the wrong dial . . .

It began with a faint humming sound—nothing more. But something that couldn't have come from Melvin at all showered Mary Anne's mind with thoughts and emotions that were like a screaming inside her head.

A continuous terrified screaming that made her want to slap her hands to her ears to shut out the sound.

The screaming stopped the instant the rocket began to vibrate. It stopped as abruptly as a jet of steam issuing from a suddenly clogged pipe.

The humming changed to a droning and the rocket vibrated so furiously that Mary Anne grew dizzy just watching it. With the dizziness came a terrible fear that the rocket would explode. It was like being bound to a chair, helpless, and knowing you couldn't possibly escape. She saw herself being blown up with the cottage, with Melvin screaming for her to save him.

But nothing like that happened. The cottage shook a little. She was hurled forward, then to her knees. But the blast of heat which fanned her face was no worse than the blast from a furnace door swinging quickly open and shut.

Straight down through the floor the rocket sank with its base glowing white hot. There were a sizzling and a hissing and she could see flames dancing through the steam which kept rising in clouds until water gushed up in torrents and put the fire out.

She shut her eyes then and clenched her hands tight.

She sat very still, waiting for Melvin to come to her. She felt a great and overwhelming need to lean on someone, to be consoled by a firm masculine voice speaking out bold and clear.

The bursting strangeness was gone from inside her head. She could move again. She refused to try but she knew that she could whenever she wanted to. Her thoughts were her own now—not Melvin's or Tall-Thin's.

She started to cry, very softly, and she was still crying when Melvin reached her side, helped her to her feet.

"Mary Anne, I could see them moving around inside the rocket. I could even make them do what I wanted them to do. It happened as soon as they turned that ray on me. I couldn't move but I knew what they were thinking."

"So did I, Melvin," Mary Anne sobbed. "I knew what *you* were thinking too."

"Yeah. We seemed to be talking together there for a minute. But not the way we're talking now."

Mary Anne nodded. "I knew what you were thinking and they knew what we . . ." Mary Anne stopped. "*Melvin!* You fooled them! Inside the ship they didn't hear us talking together. If they had heard

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us they would not have made a mistake and turned the wrong dial."

"Yeah, I know. I tried to throw up a mental block when we talked about the auxiliary fuel chamber and what would happen if the heat exchanger worked fast enough. I guess it worked. The mental block, I mean . . ."

"You bet it worked, Melvin. You're wonderful, Melvin."

"You didn't think so when you told Pop about the sandwiches."

"I didn't mean to be a nasty, Melvin."

"All right—skip it. Funny thing—I could never read anybody's thoughts before. It only lasted for a few minutes. I couldn't do it now."

"They must have done something to us, Melvin."

"I'll say they did. What's Pop going to think when he comes down here tomorrow and sees the rocket gone?"

"I'm afraid he's going to be awfully mad, Melvin."

There is perhaps no more striking illustration of the prophetic faculty at work in the world than when it appears full-blown in the occasional understatements of children.

The next morning, Elwood didn't merely hurl the magazine at his son. He pointed first to the article, tapping furiously with his forefinger at Melvin's photograph while his breakfast grew cold at his elbow.

"Melvin, I warned you to keep your hands off that rocket. I warned you not to touch it or jar it in any way. But you had to putter around until you did something to the heat exchanger dial. It's conduct like that which makes me realize how mistaken these journalist monkeys can be. A genius! You're no more of a genius—"

"Pop, you've got to believe me!" Melvin protested. "The little men are—"

"*Little men!* My son is not only a genius"—Elwood stressed the word with a biting sarcasm which was not lost on Melvin—"but a first-class liar! Here, read this article again. It was published two months ago—but I guess you didn't read it over often enough. It may shame you into going into a corner and giving yourself a thorough mental overhauling."

Elwood tossed the magazine then—straight across the table at the disturbed Melvin.

"If he's a liar so am I!" Mary Anne gasped in angry protest.

"For a dozen years now flying saucer rumors have been all over the place," Elwood said, glaring at both of his children. "I suppose it's only natural you should chatter occasionally about little men. All children do. But to use such imaginary companions as an excuse for an act of wanton destructiveness . . ."

Melvin picked up the magazine almost automatically. Solely to bolster his sagging self-esteem—even the innocent and falsely accused can feel guilty at times—he stared at his own photograph and

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the somewhat baroque caption which surmounted it.

YOUNG SCIENTIFIC AMERICA

Can genius be inherited? The distinguished accomplishments in nuclear physics and space-flight theory by the father of the boy who has won the most coveted annual award available to American youth for all-around scientific achievement strengthens the arguments of those who believe that the bright mysterious torch of genius can be passed on from father to son. But when interviewed the youthful winner of the Seabury Medal modestly disclaimed . . .

"If I saw a little man do you know what I'd do?" came in bitter reproach from the original holder of Melvin's inherited torch.

And then, in rhetorical response, "I'd make it my fight—a fight forced upon me against my will. I'd consult a good psychiatrist immediately."

"I throw myself on your mercy!" a tiny voice said. "I am unarmed, I am alone—and I am the last of my kind remaining alive on your planet."

Melvin stopped reading abruptly, flushing guiltily to the roots of his hair. He had been wishing that his father *could* see a little man and now he was being punished for his thoughts in the cruelest possible way.

The winner of the Seabury Medal knew that insanity was rare in childhood but to hear imaginary voices . . .

"Hilili thought he had extinguished me," the voice went on, "but by exerting my will to the utmost I managed to waver back. I beg you to be merciful!"

The voice became almost pathetic in its tragic pleading. "You need no longer fear me for I will soon die. Injured and weakened as I am the disease organisms so fatal to my race are certain to kill me very quickly now."

Melvin looked up then—and so did Mary Anne.

The little man stood on a bright mahogany sideboard, gleaming with all the primitive appurtenances of a Class C-type breakfast. A tray of buttered toast, crisply brown, rose like the Great Pyramid of Cheops at his back, and he was leaning for support against the coffee percolator that mirrored his wan and tormented face in wavy and distorted lines.

It was easy to see that death was already beckoning to Rujit with a solemn and pontificial bow.

"*Pop!*" Melvin gasped, leaping to his feet.

John Elwood did not answer his son. However much he may have wanted to communicate there are few satisfactory avenues of communication that remain open to a man lying flat on his stomach on the floor in a dead faint.

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the fire and the flesh

by . . . E. Hoffmann Price

Was Agni Deva flame? Or was she flesh? In either case the woman of the volcano was irresistible.

DAMN IT, WOMAN!" Harmon thrust his chair back from the breakfast table. "Java and Bali will keep, and so will the Hindu ruins. They've been at Borobudur for untold centuries, and they'll be just as romantic and glamorous next month or next year. Be *reasonable* —haven't I got enough on my mind, without sightseeing, here and now?"

Half-whimsically half-querulously Lorella Harmon complained, "It's *my* fault that blight or smut or whatever it is has struck the crop? Good Lord, Wade! You worked on this dry rice for a couple of years before the war.

"Won't it keep till next year? Haven't *you* all the time in the world? They haven't starved in Java or anywhere else so far for lack of this miracle super-rice that'll grow without irrigation on the rockiest mountainside!"

The new strain of "dry" rice, which Wade Harmon had developed after long experimentation, was doing worse than fall away from its early promise. And Lorella, just come to Tanah Merah from the States, seemed to feel badly let

Biologically man may be a far cry from the moth. Yet, perhaps as with the moth, in each of us lurks a fascination for fire that dates back to the dawn of human emergence from animal primitivism. Fiery meteor, swift lightning, blazing forest or prairie, terrifying volcano—each is fire and each attracts strangely even while it fills us with fear. Or is fire, in its essence, something more—an entity, perhaps? One of America's able author-craftsmen brilliantly explores this possibility upon these pages.

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down—not because the crop had taken a setback but because he refused to leave the plantation and go on the promised sightseeing tour until he learned what had caused the trouble.

Though slender, Lorella had no need at all for any artifices to round out her pale-blue lounging robe. Her hair had ruddy glints and an almost-nacreous sheen. Her skin was fine and smooth. Good nose and long lovely hands—all in all Lorella Harmon was an uncommonly attractive armful but for the petulance that lurked about her mouth.

"I might as well have stayed in the States! You're not a bit glad to see me!"

But Harmon had beaten her to the punch in quitting the table so Lorella did not leave. Instead she sat there to weep with heroic restraint until the door slammed. Then she bounced to her feet and pressed her face against the panes of the solarium to see how far he would go before coming back to apologize.

Wade was a wiry quick-stepping man, perhaps too impatient for the tropics. She tried to make allowances for that and for the lingering effects of war injuries, though there was scarcely a trace of a limp.

Active as he was in body, his mind left it lagging behind. That expression of farseeing-ness in the deep-set dark eyes had attracted her from the start—from their very first meeting after the war, while he was still scrambling for funds to return to Tanah Merah to resume his experiments with dry rice.

And now, she told herself bitterly, he saw so far that his opposite number at breakfast was too near to be in focus!

Harmon had no intention of coming back to apologize. Once well away from the bungalow, which had for so many weeks awaited Lorella's arrival, he divided his bitter gaze between the volcano, Merah, and the crop which would surely fail. Sniffing the air he caught a barely perceptible taint of sulphur.

Harmon began to blame Merah, the Red One, for the unfilled heads of rice, the stunted growths that had sprouted with such promise. Merah had always been an overshadowing beauty—the ever-changing hues as the sun shifted, at times ash-rose, and again a luminous purple during the brief dusk. Merah was red only when the towering cone of lavender-gray pumice was tinged by the slanting rays of early morning and late evening.

Harmon frowned at the failing crop. His plantation was on the highest of the succession of terraces from which the cone rose. Except for the ground he had cleared the entire shelf was overgrown by jungle, though there had always been a small area cultivated by the natives of the village. These people now worked for Wade Harmon.

Ahmat, the Javanese labor fore-

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man, appeared at his side. Though his hair had whitened and his eyes were ancient, his delicately modeled face was smooth albeit sharp of line.

"*Tuan,* she is angry," he said. "I have tried to make peace with her but she will not listen to the servant when the master should speak."

"*She,* Ahmat?"

"You know us of old. I have watched you looking at her long and often." Ahmat gestured. "The Red Mountain is only the house of One who lives there. She who lives in the house, her one does not see. Do you go and talk to her."

"How does a man talk to a mountain? What did you do, Ahmat, when you—talked to *her?*"

"I set fruit and flowers on the rim of the crater. As if at a shrine or image. The Presence is everywhere. Go, place your gift and perhaps she will be pleased."

"That smell in the air is what's poisoning the rice."

"No, *tuan.* It comes and it goes, it has always been so. Rice has a soul. It is frightened when Merah is angry. So it dies."

Many of the islanders believed that rice had a spirit. They believed that only a certain sort of blade was fit for cutting the stalks, else the spirit of the cereal would be angry.

"Each living thing," Ahmat had once explained, "dies in its time to nourish another living thing. That is the Excellent Law. But he who eats without giving thanks for the sacrifice of the eaten, he is cursed for his pride and it is not well with *him.*"

This had set Harmon thinking during pre-war years in Tanah Merah when he lived in his bungalow, alone with the problem of crossing one plant strain with another to accentuate desirable traits.

"But what starts the original mutation?" Harmon had once asked a lecturer at school. The man had given him a look, half of pity, half of resentment. Later there had been talk of cosmic rays, radioactivity—explanations which explained nothing.

When Ahmat had seen that under Harmon's care, the dry rice was actually changing as to the size and number of grains in each head he had offered an explanation no worse than that of the scientists and a good deal more picturesque.

"It is this way—the plant guardians, the *devas* who make things grow, they amuse themselves sometimes by making a single grain sprout a stalk that is not like any of the other stalks."

"That makes as much sense as what they told me at school."

Later, pleased by Harmon's open-mindedness, Ahmat had added, "The *devas* make changes when there is a man who sees and understands. There has always been dry rice—but the changes did not start until you came."

This queer primitive reasoning

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had finally warped Harmon into line. But he could not tell Lorella that until the rice *devas* felt like dispensing with his presence he could not take her to see Bali and Borobudur and the rest of the tourist bait.

What sustained Ahmat's contention was that growing things did respond to Harmon's touch. But Harmon felt foolish about offering gifts to a volcano.

II

When Ahmat handed him the small basket Harmon skirted the base of the cone, wanting to be out of sight of the bungalow when he began the ascent. He went cold at the thought of Lorella spotting him, insisting on going along.

There were lava beds between the plantation's edge and the foot of the cone. For perhaps a mile, he picked his way among windrows of black fragments, which looked as though a giant had picked up uncounted gondola-loads of coal to dump them in heaps. Between these bunkers was a fairly level floor, seamed and slashed by crevasses.

Finally he began a slantwise ascent of the cone. At each step he sank ankle deep, and started small slides of cinder. Before long he was exhausted and sat down on the steep slope. A feeling that he had been cut off from humanity, from all animate creatures, became stronger. Then, as his gaze shifted, he saw that Ahmat had well and rightly referred to Merah as *she*.

There were cinder dunes which began where the lava flow ended, a succession of mounds, whose curvature the somewhat overrated ladies of Bali might have envied. Each was banded and mottled, white and tawny, coral and buff, scarlet, ochre, and ash-roses. Mottled and banded like the Primordial Serpent in the shadow of whose hooded heads Brahman the Creator sleeps, waiting for the Destroyer to finish his work, resting until the time for new creation.

Harmon remembered the museum where he had seen the many-breasted statue unearthed at Ephesus. The linkage of association was so strong that he said aloud, "Diana of the Ephesians mated with the Great Serpent—Merah, the great grandaughter of all of the Nagas . . ."

And then the scientist in Harmon rebelled. He told himself, "Those color bands are caused by chemical changes in the cinder when anhydride vapors from below encounter atmospheric moisture and become acids."

Having built up a good case against intuition he resumed the ascent until at last he could look back and see, far below, the red tiles of the bungalow roof. It was like looking into another world.

On reaching the crater lip, he looked down into a bowl whose flat floor was broken by crevasses. It supported a confusion of towering lava bulwarks and pinnacles. Wisps of steam curled from several floor

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and wall crevasses. A light snow-pack clung to the slope.

He made his way down into the shadow of the turrets and spires. There were passages almost arched over into arcades with only a thin thread of sky showing through. More and more, he got the feeling that all this had been erected by gods or demons—and for no good purpose.

Then, disconcertingly, mist gathered. It thickened. It plumed and spiraled. Murky twilight became darkness at noon. Sudden panic made him turn and run until he emerged from the passage. There he stopped, for he could neither see the crater wall nor anything that was more than a yard from him.

Whichever way he went, he should soon reach the side of the bowl and come up into the light again. But to do so he would have to move in a straight line—and this was impossible. Gaping crevasses and towering pillars kept him from holding a straight course. Every few paces demanded a detour.

He cursed the volcano and his own folly and Ahmat's as well. Then a detached segment of consciousness warned him and he sat down. He closed his eyes, and drew a deep breath—a second—a third.

A moment later he perceived that he was not alone. There was a blurred something coming toward him. Though it took shape before tension could again mount he got to his feet, all a-quiver.

Of a sudden, the form blossomed into color. It was as if a spotlight had been turned on the girl. Her garments were not of the island pattern. If her skirt was actually wound sarong-wise, then she had her own trick of arranging it. Instead of blouse or short jacket, she wore her breasts bound with a scarf, leaving her midriff bare.

Over this foundation she wore a long garment that put him in mind of the *sari* of Hindustan, a tunic which after enveloping her body, left a fold sufficient to conceal all but a glimpse of black hair and of ear lobes from which hung ornately worked golden pendants.

In one hand she carried a tiny basket, much like the one Harmon had abandoned in panic. The other, peeping from the garment, gathered the folds. They were exquisite hands, cream colored, with finger-tips henna-dyed. She wore neither bracelets nor anklets. There was no caste mark to brand her smooth forehead—no jewelled stud defaced her nose.

Her grave loveliness, at first finding expression in eyes which were dark and longish, now spread into life with her smile. Her glance took in the abandoned basket. Understanding at once she said, "You don't know where to put it? I'll show you."

"Ahmat told me," Harmon began, gropingly. "He didn't want to offer these things to—ah—Merah. He thought . . ."

"I'm Agni Deva," she said as though to explain why her features

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were not Malayan—why, without seeming in any wise foreign, she was in so many small ways unlike other island women. Then, "Don't worry about the fog. I shall guide you."

He followed her into another of the labyrinth's entrances. Surely some conscious and designing one had modeled the once-plastic lava as a baker might garnish a cake. The shrine at which Agni Deva stopped was not human handiwork nor could it have been made by nature. He sensed that Agni Deva herself was an ambiguity in flesh and blood.

After a genuflection she set her basket on the altar and pronounced words he could not understand. Stepping back she said, "I'll say it for you if you've forgotten what Ahmat told you."

"Will it be just as good?"

"Oh, of course!"

Harmon recited, "I bring the Red One an offering of good will and ask for the sweetness of her breath to be good for my rice. I ask for good will toward the rice I plant in the courtyard of her house."

Agni Deva was pleased: "That was just right. But you were angry at her awhile ago, and frightened, and you cursed her in your heart. Sit down while you wait for the fog to lift. Sit here. Throw your thoughts toward the altar." Her voice dimmed a little as she repeated, "Toward it—toward her—in front of you—always in front. Away from you—out from yourself . . ."

When, with a start, he realized that he was alone and that brilliant sunlight reached down just behind him, he knew that for a measurable time his thought and more than any mere thoughts had been "out in front."

Harmon picked his way from the crater rim to go down the slope. He looked back but saw no trace of Agni Deva nor of the way she had left.

III

Harmon was not surprised by the quick recovery of the rice from its setback, though all he did was observe and record. He set down the readings of instruments which measured temperature, humidity, air density. He set forth his findings on soil analysis, and on all the insect pests and plagues. He entered everything except his visits to the volcano.

Every so often he met Agni Deva. He did not mention her to Ahmat. Natives would gossip and sooner or later the story would work its way to the bungalow staff. Lorella had her ways of learning things.

That she quit nagging about the postponed cruise was a relief until her flattering interest in his work became overdone. This hampered Harmon. Getting to the crater was impossible without being observed. He racked his brain for an excuse to get away from Lorella long

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enough to make the climb—but in vain.

The rice continued thriving, yet Ahmat looked worried—for there were now earth tremors. Gentle nudges rattled dishes in the china-closet, the glassware on the buffet. Sulphur fumes became strong.

Lorella became alarmed. "We'll be burned alive or buried without warning!" she cried, one morning when fumes entirely concealed the black bulwarks of the lava beds. "And that everlasting hissing!"

"It's no more dangerous than geysers back home."

"Good Lord! *Why* did you have to pick a volcano!"

"There isn't any other sort of mountain in the archipelago."

"Well, but most of them are extinct."

"Merah is practically so."

"*Practically* so!" Lorella echoed, her voice rising. "If we don't leave here soon, I'll get out and you can have your volcano!"

In fairness, Harmon didn't blame her.

He said, "Let's wait a few more days, darling. These things aren't touched off with a fuse. They give plenty of warning."

He told Ahmat to prepare a basket. That night, when moonlight reached into the bungalow, Harmon tiptoed to the verandah, carrying his boots. The crater would be safe enough. The subterranean forces were finding escape at the base of the cone, in the lava beds, as they had done before.

He had barely set out when Lorella's voice checked him. She wore slacks and sneakers. Even by moonlight he read the anger in her face. "Let me go and see how *she* likes orchids! Oh, don't give me that *I-don't-know-what-you-mean* look. I was awake when Ahmat set the basket on the porch. I've noticed how you two always change the subject the minute I come near."

"Orchids . . ." Harmon began, gropingly.

"Yes, orchids! I got a peep. Whoever she is, she must be quite a girl. My coming to join you must have been quite an upset. Is she pre-war or someone new?"

"This is not what you think."

"Purely platonic!" Lorella mocked. "Merely interested in her beautiful soul! Is she almost white?"

"Go back to bed!" he answered. "She's neither white nor brown nor any other color. Go back where you belong."

She recoiled as though he had struck her. In his mind he had done just that. Then she renewed the attack. "I'm going to see this lady of yours."

"You're going back," he said, with a coldness which surprised him. "Back to the States. You can have your sightseeing tour on the way. I'm not going to meet a woman. Though I probably will soon enough at the rate you're cutting up."

"Wade, what is this? Don't quarrel with me. What *is* this?"

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"Come and see," he challenged and turned toward the lava beds. "But if you're wrong, you're through, as far as I'm concerned. This is Tanah Merah. You're not in the States, where your tiniest whim was law!"

"I'll risk that," she decided and went with him.

But when they came to the edge of the lava beds and the swirling girdle of low-hanging vapor she caught his arm. "You can't lead me on any wild-goose chase!"

He tried to brush her aside. She got in front of him. She struck the basket from his hand, spilling the flowers and cakes.

"No chewing gum? No beads or mirrors?"

Harmon picked up the offering and put it back in the basket. Lorella's belittlement and contempt prodded him to recklessness and revolt.

"I'm taking this to Merah. Not a woman but a volcano. To stop this eruption. I've tried for days to get rid of you long enough to come out here but since you have to know you've found out. We have to make friends with Merah or get out. Is that clear?"

It was not. Her eyes became saucer wide. He had not moved, though he may have swayed a little on his feet. Perhaps the mist-filtered moonlight played an eerie trick with his expression. Lorella's mouth moved soundlessly and then she screamed. Then she ran.

Harmon drew a breath of pure relief and picked his way among the traps of the lava field until he came to the now well-defined path he had cut in the cinder slopes.

In the morning, hours after his return from the silence and peace of the crater, Harmon sat in the breakfast alcove. Brilliant sunlight made the slopes of the cone gleam and shimmer. He thrust aside the papaya and limes. And as though there had been no clash the previous night, he called.

Lorella stepped lightly from then on. She was not in the least interested when, the following day, he went to make his next offering. This time he had a few words with Agni Deva in the crater, and while he did not mention that strange woman, her words gave force to what he said to Lorella on his return.

"Whether or not it makes any sense I'm keeping her happy. And you should see that rice! It's more than made up for the setback."

Nevertheless he had the feeling that Lorella was laying it on heavily in her effort to convince him that she was convinced.

IV

Not until Ahmat handed him a blotter some days later did Harmon realize his troubles were only beginning.

"What's this for?" he asked.

"*Tuan*, it lay in the compound. Doubtless the wind blew it from a window. It is in writing, which I do not read."

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This was delivered just a shade too suavely. Natives, most of them wholly illiterate, did have a respect for anything written. Yet Harmon was certain Ahmat knew more than he would admit—that the man had in fact taken it from the writing desk in the bungalow or had got it from a servant he had set spying on Lorella.

Harmon held the blotter to a mirror. Lorella had penned a note to the American consul in Batavia, asking his advice—

. . . cracking under strain . . . cannot persuade him to take time out . . . hallucinations . . . not believe . . . him violent, but . . . aside from . . . what authorities can I consult . . . send him . . . States . . . guardian appoint . . .

First thing he knew, he'd be hustled home under guard. They'd blame it all on his wartime hardships and he'd wind up as a guest of the Veterans Administration, at least for awhile. By the time he got himself into the clear his work would have been so long neglected he'd have to start all over.

The tension between him and Lorella became so unbearable that he spent more and more time in the crater—it became a refuge from the artificial amiability of the bungalow.

At times he saw Agni Deva leaving the shrine just as he was approaching. He tried vainly to overtake her but she knew the labyrinth far more intimately than he did. Once he looked up and saw her on the crater lip, dwarfed by distance and foreshortening, yet splendid of color and shape against the stark blue of the sky. She waved before she stepped out of his sight to go her way.

When he described her to Ahmat the old man declared he had never seen any such person. Nevertheless, Ahmat's address thereafter became respectful in a new way.

Then, one afternoon as he approached the bungalow, he spotted visitors on the verandah—Kirby and Voerhaven, the copra planters he had not seen since Lorella's arrival. She had set out a stone jug of Bols, tumblers and tonic on the table.

Kirby was broad and deep-chested, a thick-necked muscular man, ruddy and square-faced. Voerhaven, though large, was lean and rangy with a long, angular face and a long inquisitive nose. Both were hearty fellows and gave Harmon no chance to apologize for his apparent unsociability in not having joined them from time to time for *rijstafel* or a few rounds of gin. After several Holland-sized drinks they insisted on having a look at the crop.

"It's true," Voerhaven rumbled. "It's better than they said."

Kirby wagged his head, saying, "Takes an American, every time, Dirk!"

Harmon protested, "That kind of talk never made Americans

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popular anywhere else in the world except in the States."

"Oh, all right! Dirk and I have a chap down at his *kampong* who's interested. Traveling for a foundation. They seem to have foundations for everything but copra. This one's for the better understanding of someone by someone else and rice seems to enter."

"Hmmm . . . Wants to buy in? I have all the backing I need—trust fund from an uncle's estate. And when the strain's really established half the seed goes to the Indonesian government. The other half is mine to exploit."

Voerhaven shrugged and made a gesture to acknowledge defeat. "Oh, very well, Wade! We've tried to fix up a little surprise for you. The man's name is Forest Millington. You've been favorably considered for an award by the Foundation for Fostering Far Eastern Amity."

"A surprise but you're such a damn skeptic—" said Kirby.

"Way you keep yourself buried," Voerhaven carried on, "we might have known—"

When they got back to the house, Lorella, all aglow, added her enthusiasm. "Oh, I'm so thrilled! Do hurry and take your shower."

"Let's have another noggin," said Kirby.

Lorella splashed the oily gin into a tumbler with one hand, the tonic with the other. Harmon snatched the glass, raised it, and said, "How!" He waggled his free hand and with fingers wrapped about the tumbler hustled for the bedroom with its adjoining shower.

Intentionally he knocked a chair over, made a point of cursing luridly. He took another wary taste of the drink. The glass contained too much gin, not enough tonic.

Harmon remained dressed while dipping into the big earthenware jar and splashing water on the floor of the stall. Next he turned on the shower, which was fed from a small tank on the roof. Under cover of the sound he tiptoed to the rear and skirted the building.

There were no voices to overhear. That was the payoff.

He retraced his course. He reentered from the rear in time to see Voerhaven, Kirby and Lorella huddled at the bedroom door, heads cocked close to the panel.

Kirby had some luggage straps. Voerhaven had a length of clothesline. They were waiting for him to pass out.

Then they became aware of him. On both sides there was an unmasking.

"You go with us," Kirby said commandingly.

Lorella's face was hard and tense. The Dutchman needed a moment to nerve himself to tackle a man who was sober and alert. Harmon recoiled, not so much from the physical threat as from the actual sight of what he had for some moments suspected.

Lorella had taken her problem to the only other white men on the

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island—evidently these two former good friends had been convinced by her story. The yarn about the "foundation" must have been to get Harmon as far as the waterfront. There, plied with gin, he was to have been dumped into a *prahu* and taken to Batavia.

Straps and cords to tie a madman—that was what prodded Harmon to wildness exceeding their expectations. *His momentary recoil* had thrown them off guard. As they gathered themselves to close in, Harmon charged. He upset Kirby, knocking him into Lorella. Flung against the door she tumbled over the threshold. Voerhaven tried to tackle him and missed.

Harmon yelled, "You're crazier'n you think *I* am!"

He smashed the tall man with a driving wallop, knocking him athwart Kirby.

"Get him!" Lorella screamed. "He'll go for the car!"

Harmon, clear of the three, raced for the front, not to take the jeep but to get his shotgun from the rack in the living room. It was not there. Lorella must have seen to that.

He had missed his chance to kick and slug the two men helpless. They were on their feet and Lorella was at their heels.

"Don't let him get away!" she screamed. "He'll kill us all!"

V

There was nowhere to go with a car except to the waterfront village. From there the only refuge was an open boat to Java. By then Harmon would be established as a madman who had beaten up his guests and his wife. Having taken a stand the three could not afford to retreat.

All Harmon wanted was to get away. He wanted escape from white faces and English speech. He wanted neither sight nor sound of his own kind. He had but one refuge—Merah, the Red One.

He had wrenched his ankle in the scuffle. His old wound betrayed him. Yet for a moment desperation made him gain on his pursuers.

"Wade, *do* come back!" Lorella cried.

Wearing slacks and flat heels she kept up with the men. She knew the ground as they did not.

Once in the lava beds Harmon hoped to trick them into a pocket. But they stayed too close on his heels. Desperate, winded, his leg threatening to let him down, Harmon gambled on his final resource. He bolted for the foot of the cone. His pursuers' advantage was set off to a degree by Harmon's experience as they zigzagged up the slope. Drawn by the contest Lorella kept up.

They shouted. Though they were too winded to shape their words Harmon guessed their meaning. They were trying to dissuade him from what they considered the futility of his going ever upward to the apex, the end of flight. Or perhaps they feared he would plunge

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headlong into the depths of the crater.

Mists gathered about the rim. He had only a little way to go. Behind him he heard the rustle and rattle of cinders dislodged by the three on his heels.

"Come back!" Kirby shouted.

Voerhaven burst out with a gasping, "we won't hurt you!"

Fatigue had turned Harmon's legs to wood. He stumbled, he rolled, he clawed the slope. He checked himself. During his tumble, he saw that the three had halted. Their faces were distorted from breathlessness and from strain. And there was fear. This last puzzled Harmon. But he surprised them and himself by regaining his feet.

"I'm staying up here! I won't be locked up. Get out or you'll wish you had!" His wrath checked them.

Refreshed he fairly bounded up the grade. There, on the lava rim, stood Agni Deva, her arms extended in welcome. Her flame-colored *sari* wavered, rippled and seemed to transmit light. And her body was more than half translucent.

Looking back he saw through many veils of mist that his pursuers stood open mouthed, their faces still shaped by the cries which they could not repeat. Kirby took Lorella by one arm, Voerhaven by the other. They half-dragged, half-carried her.

Agni Deva nudged Harmon. "When they've taken care of her they'll stay away." She smiled cryptically. "The elevation is bad for people who aren't accustomed to it," she said as he went with her into the crater's bowl.

"They looked scared," Harmon observed thoughtfully. "As though they'd seen a ghost."

Agni Deva's soft little laugh had an indulgent, almost maternal note. "That would be hard to explain. But once you have seen enough of my home, you will realise that nothing worth knowing can be put into words anyway."

"Your home, *here*?"

"Oh, I didn't ever tell you, did I?"

Presently, he realised she did live in the crater. He followed Agni Deva into a tunnel which had walls glass-smooth and perfectly circular except for the flattening of the bottom. There were cross-passages and crypts, most of them softly lighted by rays which reached down through rifts and the tubular opening. In one passageway she picked up a brazen pot which she filled from a natural basin in which water accumulated.

This she balanced on her head and went on until she showed him the blue flames issuing from crevices in a hearth. Very much in the way of a housewife rightly proud of her home she said, "Always fire. It comes from below, so I never have to gather wood. The four elements are always right at hand. Fire, water, earth and air. Oh yes, earth, of course—I'll show you my garden later.

"You've done so well with earth.

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All your life you've loved earth, so the rice followed your coaxing. Earth was your way to wisdom. But you can learn the way of fire also. It's so much faster for those who can take that way."

Harmon didn't even try to keep up with her cozy patter as he looked about at the carved teak chest, the mats, the scarves and sarongs. There were wall niches where silver betelnut boxes and ear-pendants and cosmetic jars mingled in comfortable confusion. A low archway opened into an adjoining crypt.

Seeing his glance wander, Agni Deva ceased speaking of the way of fire and said, "My friends often bring me presents. But they'll not disturb you. Do sit down—you're awfully tired."

Harmon sat on the teak chest. Agni Deva spread a mat at his feet and seated herself crosslegged in the "lotus posture" so that the henna-stained soles of her tiny feet were upturned. The hierophantic posture reminded him of the figures sculptured at Borobudor and Ankor Vat.

But when she flung aside the head covering, exposing her sleek black hair, and leaned back to pillow her head against his knee, he could hardly associate her with sculptured images. He got off the chest and seated himself beside her.

"This seems more a pagoda than a home. What are you, the priestess of Merah?"

"You mean the temple slave?" She reflected for a moment. "Words can't express anything that's really important. The only things you can know are those you experience directly. The Gods don't talk. If you really want to know what I am the knowledge is here and waiting.

"After all, the way of earth is familiar to you, so why can't the way of fire be your next step? You needn't pass through air and water. The truth is, you probably couldn't."

Harmon smiled at her baffling whimsies, smiled to conceal his perplexity and relish the touch of her body against him. This strange woman was warm and solid and definite without any suggestion of vagueness.

"Agni Deva," he said, speaking the words with the slowness of entire relish. "Deva . . . Deva . . ."

"My parents named me to honor the fire spirits," she explained. "We name children after gods and *devas* the way your people name them after saints. If you knew the old, old language that was brought over from Hindustan, you'd understand. But you needn't bother with language. There are better ways—"

"By becoming one with that which is to be known," Harmon said and took her in his arms and bent down to her upturned mouth.

To make the most of the embrace she uncoiled herself from the lotus posture. And Harmon knew that she had been well named for *agni* meant fire . . .

Since dense mist obscured the crater and blotted out the sun Har-

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mon wondered at the permanent twilight of Agni Deva's home. His watch had stopped for he knew not how long—though time did not concern him any too much.

He was engrossed with a thought which he finally put into words. "Ahmat and some of the others spoke of a deva of the volcano but never as though they'd seen her," he said. "Well now I have and you're she. To every one of the senses, you're a flesh-and-blood woman—still, all *that* must be illusion and you're not only the way of fire but you *are* fire. Not in the form we know it on the outside, something which is set or built or made or lighted, but fire-that-always-was."

She nodded, smiled contentedly. "And always will be, Wade," she said. "Elemental fire—all of me you've seen and heard and touched and smelled and tasted is *maya,* the unreal. The only reality of me is what you have not yet known and cannot know through any of your senses."

"But I just said I knew and you agreed," he objected.

"Oh, that was only a necessary handy way of speaking. What you meant was that you had begun to have a knowledge that there was actually something to be known. Don't you see the difference?"

With a chuckle he answered, "Sure I do! It's the sort of jargon my philosophy professor used to spout by the hour—except that you give sense to it and he didn't."

"Of *course* he didn't—he couldn't. He was talking about something far too far from him. You, who listened, knew he didn't know and so you were smarter."

"If he could only hear this!" Harmon exclaimed delightedly. "It's funny, though, but I begin to see the sense of what he was trying to say when he spoke of the essence of the thing-in-itself, the reality apart from the weight or size or bulk or any quality at all. All right, you're the essence of fire, and just for convenience or necessity or because you want it that way you're tricked out as a woman. In which you couldn't have made a neater choice!

"But if I, the so-called 'I' that my friends were chasing up the cone to catch and lock up, am *maya,* what is the actual me, where is it?"

She looked at him a long time, steadily but with mysteriously changing eyes and a smile that was entirely inward. She closed her eyes as though to blot out illusion and when she opened them she said, "Let that answer itself when the times comes. Now cease trying to get ahead of yourself. I'm going to make a *rijstafel.*"

The dish which Agni Deva prepared exceeded the fieriness that Harmon had so extravagantly described. It was an initiation.

"This *is* the way of fire!"

She laughed at his grimace, said he'd soon get used to it and added very soberly, "Wade, one day you

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may learn that fire is not hot. If ever the test comes accept it—don't be afraid."

"Accept it? Suppose I have no choice?"

"All the more, do not be afraid. It is not as you think."

So he ate a slice of fresh mango to extinguish the flame. Then he said, "Kiss me and see if a bite of mango will be cooling."

* * * * *

But at last there came into those timeless hours the recollection of the rice crop. Harvest time was near. Whenever Harmon spoke of it to Agni Deva she assured him he had nothing at all to worry about.

Eventually, however, he declared, "I should go back. They must by now have cooled down enough to get rid of their notion of locking me up. If they haven't I'll know where to go and what to do. Probably I'll surprise them when I show up just as though nothing had happened."

She smiled cryptically. "You will. Oh, you surely will."

"If there's any trouble I'll be back and in a hurry."

"Must you go?"

"It's my work. All this has been beautiful. I've never before known beauty. What I took for beauty was always *maya*. Lorella's face—the unmasking—it's not on her account I'm going back. *You* know that."

"That much I can count on! But the rice is thriving. I've made it thrive. After all, *I am Merah*. You know this but you're impatient, restless."

"Because I'm human." With one hand he gripped his other, kneading and twisting it. "All this is *maya*. But whatever the real *I*, it has to do and act. Sitting here and *being* is not enough. You're different. Your doing is only a sideline. Maybe if I knew more about *being* I'd see less importance in *doing*."

She drew a deep breath. Her smile became a glowing loveliness. "Go then and don't think of me as neglected or deserted. Go, do your work and come back when it's done. Maybe then you'll be ready to walk the way of fire, to become fire with me, like me."

"We'll *be* the volcano, you and I?" he said in affectionate whimsy. He kissed her.

VI

Taking no chances of another encounter with Lorella's allies, one or both of whom might still be at the house, Harmon made a wide circuit and headed for the native *kampong*, to see Ahmat.

Instead of greeting him the men and women who had worked in the fields regarded him with consternation. They looked as though they wanted to run but could not. The laughter of women and the speech of the groups of men who sat gossipping stopped at the sight of him. The silence that followed made Harmon feel life had suddenly left the Malays, that the

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houses of thatch and rattan were homes of the dead.

He saw Ahmat and called him by name. "Tell these people I am not crazy. You know why those two fellows tried to take me away."

"They told us you were dead—fallen into the fires of Merah. You were on the rim and fire came up to pull you down. We believed but plainly it is not true." He addressed the others. "Merah let him come back. Merah does what pleases her. Do you believe what is before you, or believe what they told us?"

Harmon asked, "Ahmat, what's been happening?"

"Come, sit with us, we aren't afraid."

Harmon accepted the invitation. Ahmat's face was troubled but from natural reasons. The others had a similar expression. Disturbed, they exchanged glances. It was as though his being alive had raised a new problem.

"What's wrong?"

"Your wife, the lady who calls herself your widow, she went last week to Batavia with Kirby to be married. We expect them back in a few days."

"See here! I can understand her marrying Kirby or Voerhaven or anyone else, and I'm all in favor of it. But what do you mean, *last week?*"

"You have been gone many weeks, *tuan.*"

"What?"

"Be pleased to come with me and see the new rice crop." When Harmon had followed, with most of the *kampong* at his heels, Ahmat gestured at the expanse of sprouting blades. "You had too much on your mind to notice this when you came," the old man said. "But surely you remember that when you went a crop awaited harvest. Could it become young again or is this a new one?"

The field spoke for itself. Dazed, Harmon asked, "Tell me more of what they said? What happened to me that day?"

"You ran. They chased. They said fire came to pull you into the crater. When they looked back there was no more fire—only steam. When they tried to look heat drove them and fumes choked them before they could get to the rim. They knew that nothing could live through that fire."

Harmon said, "All I saw was mist and a young woman reaching to give me a hand if I stumbled. Her name is Agni Deva. She lives up there. When it seemed time to return to my work I left. How is it at my bungalow?"

"There is no enemy. There is only a young woman there, Kirby's sister. She came by air when they told her of his plans to marry. What you do or what you do not do, that is for you to decide. Haste is evil. Talk to her and think and when you know what is to be done, then we will do it with you and for you. And that is on our head and on our eyes!"

And so, presently, Harmon met

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Eileen Kirby, who was not in the least disconcerted at the sight of him, since they had never until that moment met.

Eileen was just short of being plump and like so many solidly built women she had unusually small feet and dainty ankles and carried herself straight up. He had scarcely seen her move more than a few steps when he realized that this was one of the only two or three women he had ever seen who could wear high heels without seeming to stilt along, ever on the verge of falling on her chin.

Her tawny golden hair waved naturally. The curl was particularly noticeable in the strands on either side of the part, at the center. Her cheekbones were sufficiently prominent to give a piquant touch, which kept her features from being too regular, though her nose added zest, being neither tiptilted nor yet quite straight. The nostrils had an eager flare and the friendly eyes, dark and warm, made him welcome at once. Harmon knew that she would be easy to talk to and she was.

She listened to his story without revealing any doubts as to his sanity. She finally said, "You've described Lorella and my brother Dave, and you've told me where to find your picture and other things in the house. Oh, don't try to explain or prove anything!

"However it happened, whatever did happen, you're Wade Harmon. Oh, it's awful—what an embarrassing fix Lorella and Dave are in. They *did* believe you dead."

Harmon shrugged. While her sympathy did her credit he saw no good cause for being concerned.

"Suppose we take it easy till they get back from their honeymoon," he said. "There must be some way out of all this without hurting anyone."

"You're not at all resentful?"

"The more I think about it the less I can hold it against her or them for thinking I was balmy. She couldn't really think otherwise. And we couldn't have got along again afterward. We'd not been doing any too well before it happened. It's simply a matter of getting the property and the business unscrambled. What possessed you to take over the place by yourself?"

"I could hardly tag along on their honeymoon, could I?"

"No, I suppose not. So you just stayed here to carry on with your sketching and painting?" he asked.

"After all, that's what I came over for. I'd wanted to for a long time but Dave discouraged me. The political mess. But that's quieted down now."

The more Eileen told him the more complex Harmon's problem became. He sat up with her until some hours past midnight, testing one suggestion after another. But there was no way in which he could straighten out such material essentials as the trust fund without making Lorella's unintentional bigamy conspicuously public.

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The following day he and Eileen resumed the discussion. She devoted herself to the human side of the problem as though it involved far more than merely her brother, who certainly knew his way around and had little need for her solicitous pondering. She ended by going with Harmon to look at the new crop, then to the granaries where the first crop of the improved strain was stored.

"All this," he said, as they regarded the warehouses of woven rattan, "is left after sowing every bit of cleared ground on the shelf. It's a growing business your brother married into."

He told her how his success would help the ever-increasing population of Java to feed itself without imports from other countries equally short of grain. Dry rice had always grown after a fashion but not in a way to be relied upon. The crop which fed the Indies required terraced and dyked fields, which had to be flooded. Thus land above the irrigation level could not be cultivated, since pumping sufficient water was out of the question. With dry rice, it would be otherwise.

It never occurred to Harmon that all this might be an old story to Eileen—and each day, he showed her how the new growth was developing, true to type.

"It can probably be improved—anything can. But this is success, no doubt about it." He glanced up at the volcano, during a long moment crowded with memories. "My work is done. There's no reason why I should be a nuisance or obstacle."

Eileen's eyes became wide and troubled. She did not speak until they were back on the verandah. "Wade, you sounded so solemn and out-of-this-world back there. Not depressed but—well, you've got me feeling low. What was on your mind?"

"Oh? Back there?"

Again Agni Deva loomed up in his mind. The recollection of her loveliness was so keen as to be painful. Yet he could not go back. Not even a *deva* could be a twenty-four-hour-a-day interest for one who, as she herself had so often phrased it, was "bound to the wheel" of action and doing. Agni Deva had understood. She had been too wise to keep him imprisoned. Each succeeding day Harmon spent with Eileen convinced him of Agni Deva's wisdom.

"What was it, Wade?" she persisted.

Regarding her intently he saw not the serene omniscience of the timeless but the troubled spirit of a warm and human woman, one who like himself was bound to the wheel.

"I was thinking," Harmon said, "how easy it would be to end this muddle. Just make it so."

"Oh, *no!*"

The cry was low-voiced but stabbing, shocking in its intensity.

"Darling!" he exclaimed. "I

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didn't mean it *that* way. Good Lord, I meant just that there are other things to do, other work to do, other experiments to carry on. That's what I meant when I thought of making it so. The notion that I was finished suggested going somewhere else to carry on, where I'd bother no one."

Reaction unstrung her. With a cry of relief she caught him in both arms. She kissed him time and again—her tears trickled down his cheeks. But though all this was purely human sympathy the fact remained that Eileen was a woman and wholly desirable. Her distress on his behalf, her solicitude, went beyond the friendliness they had set out to express.

Before the two had relaxed from the first tension of contact Harmon was saying, "We can leave together. You're so very much like me. Your work brought you out here. Wherever we go you can carry on. We shan't hamper each other—for all I know we can be mutually helpful."

She drew back a little and looked up at him with gleaming eyes. "Wade, do you mean that? We've been thrown together so closely from the moment we met. . . . Are you sure this isn't just an impulse?"

"If you're wondering whether it's not a case of your being too exciting an armful of woman for me to stay cool and aloof around you, you're right. But it's more than that. What counts is that you had a thought for me and weren't doing any figuring for yourself. You've been groping and grappling with this problem from the start, not for your brother's sake but for mine. Now do you see what I mean?"

"I do and I love it. And some day you might tell me what really happened up there in the crater. I won't think you're crazy." Eileen laughed softly. "Maybe that's the artist in me. And you with your plant biology—you're an artist in a more important way."

Harmon glanced at the volcano. He knew now that Agni Deva was surely a goddess. The contrast between her and a human woman gave him the knowledge directly.

"Someday I may find the words to tell you. Right now there's so much I can't understand. The only certainty is that Merah did stop erupting when I took an offering to the crater."

"They admitted that themselves."

Harmon chuckled. "But since they could not understand or explain why, they insisted the fact proved I was crazy. Do you know, a lot of scientists are just that way?" He stretched in a yawn of contentment, slumped comfortably, drew Eileen closer.

"I've half a notion not to wait for Dave and Lorella to come back from that king-sized honeymoon of theirs. Though I guess we should wait so they won't be worried about you or by yarns the natives tell

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about my ghost coming down from the mountain."

"I'd like to leave now," she murmured. "I have a feeling that we should while we can. But—well, you're right."

"What are you afraid of, fussbudget? Brother raise cain at the thought of your taking charge of a lunatic?"

"Oh, I don't *know*. It's just—but we'll wait."

Several days later there was an earthquake. Fumes issued from the crevices at the foot of the cone. Ahmat came to say, "*Tuan*, you are our father and our grandfather. You have increased our rice. But Merah is jealous. She is displeased because of the yellow-haired lady. Send her away or it will not be well with any of us."

"Is danger close at hand or is this a first warning?"

"That we do not know. But all the seed-rice may be destroyed if Merah sends lava over the *kampong*."

"But how can I send this woman away? Where would she go? Have you ever sent your guest away or anyone who had your protection?"

"I have never been put to that test," Ahmat admitted. "But with your permission we will pack up our goods, carry seed-rice on our heads and save what we can. If Merah is angry . . ."

"What makes you think it's on *her* account?"

"Because Merah saved you from your enemies, so now you belong to her. You cannot belong to this strange woman."

"Do what *seems* good, Ahmat," was all that Harmon could answer. There was even less that he could say to Eileen when, that night, they noted the dull glow which indicated lava was flowing into the debris of the previous upsurge.

"Maybe we'd better not wait for Dave and Lorella," she finally suggested. "If this keeps up I'd better start packing."

"We'd better," he amended and, thinking back to Ahmat's words, he wondered if it would be as simple as all that.

VII

The following afternoon, Dave and Lorella arrived with Voerhaven in his jeep. Harmon found and pocketed his pistol. "Go and break the news," he told Eileen. "Tell them I'll not be chased around again. I'll not put up with any attempts at manhandling. I don't want trouble but they'll get it if they force my hand."

"Darling, I don't want trouble either. But I'm all for you, and with you. I don't care who's hurt, not if it has to be."

That morning the subterranean muttering had subsided. The earth-tremors had ceased. Harmon, watching from a window, noted that the hiss of escaping vapors was not as loud. Then he dismissed Ahmat's fears, for the meeting of Eileen with the three who had come

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into the compound held all his attention.

He heard their voices crack with shock and incredulity. He saw them recoil and regain their ground. They made false starts for the bungalow, then checked themselves. The three closed in on Eileen as though to force her to deny the whole story as a hoax. It was as if they counted her mad and felt that she could become sane again by admitting she was crazy.

Harmon strolled into view. "Let her alone," he said easily. "I sent her to break the news but since you can't take it that way, have a look. Who am I? You know now. Come on in—and congratulations. Sure I mean it—no double talk."

Once in the house he said, "Sit down—Eileen, tell them about us. They'll believe it sooner, coming from you. The servants are out and they'll stay away until this is settled. They want no part of it. Tell them while I round up a drink."

When he returned Eileen had done with reciting what she and Harmon proposed.

"In the first place, Dave," she summed up, "it's none of your business what I do or who with. In the second place, even if Wade and I were planning, as you put it, bigamy, it's no worse than what you two have already done.

"It will simply put us all on a par, so you'll never have any cause to doubt our good faith. You'll know we don't mean to embarrass you, much less blackmail you.

"And finally, Wade and I will clear this up legally. In Paris or Manila, I don't know where, but somewhere."

"Drink to it," Harmon proposed cheerily.

Voerhaven reached for a glass. Kirby snatched Lorella's wrist when she would have followed suit.

"Don't be silly!" Harmon said. "We'll take the two left after you've had your choice. It all came from the same bottle."

Kirby gulped and grimaced. "This has shaken us."

"What do you suppose," Harmon said, "your doings, weeks ago, did to me? But I told you I'm not griped and I mean it. No unkindness meant, Lorella, but all I can say is I'm just lucky. You and I could never have picked up where we left off, not even if we'd wanted to. Not after that straitjacket proposition.

"Eileen's right. We'll disappear, she and I, take new names if it'll make you feel better. You can stake us to my half of the property and income and rights and the like she's inherited from me. I'm making myself so much a party to fraud and all the other legal violations that I'd not dare do other than shoot square. Wake up, Dave! Can't you see I'm not resentful, that you've given me a big break?"

Dave Kirby got up. He thrust out his hand. "We'll meet you all the way. It took us awhile to believe you'd trust us or leave your

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work in our hands. Now that there's so little to do but routine."

Voerhaven said, "Harmon, you and Eileen come to my house. Mr. and Mrs. Kirby—ah—they're bound to be embarrassed otherwise. Let me help you with your luggage."

"Come on, Lorella," Eileen said, "help me finish packing. I'd already started. Dave, round up the servants. Now that all's under control they'll come back. We might as well have dinner together before Wade and I move on to our next station."

Packing had scarcely reached the halfway stage when Dave Kirby came back from the *kampong*. "The natives," he said, "are hauling out, bag and baggage. And with baskets of seed-rice. The volcano has them worried silly. And we'd better follow their example. They've got an instinct for such things."

His voice had a note in it which brought the entire group together in the living room. They followed him to the verandah. There, thanks to the several bays of copper screening, they got a true picture of how much the situation had changed during the short time since the arrival of Voerhaven and the honeymooners.

The fumes were more dense and acrid than any Wade Harmon had ever before observed. The wind was hot and charged with fine particles of pumice. The hissing had become ominous—the underground muttering and mumbling had increased in volume.

There came a tremor that made the ground of the garden surge and billow. The bungalow creaked and groaned and rattled for what seemed an endless period. A table skated on its casters, smashing against the buffet. When the shock tapered off there persisted an unbroken vibration as though, far beneath the plantation shelf, jolt after jolt kept the foundations of the island in motion.

Smoke rose from the jungle beyond the rice-fields. The luxuriant growth had caught fire from the lava-flow. Clouds of steam rose from the bed of a small stream. Deer came racing into the open.

"Getting bad," Harmon said. "The less dallying, the better."

"Lava over that way," Voerhaven pointed out. "Judging from the steam there must be a big surge from a fresh crack."

"If the road's blocked," Kirby said, "we're in a pretty mess."

After loading their goods in the jeep Voerhaven drove, with the others plodding after the vehicle. They had not gone far when he pulled up. The road was blocked by lava. In the shadow of the trees it had a dull red glow. The second wave, flowing over the first, was not cooling as rapidly. It glowed a much brighter red.

"She's slopping over," Voerhaven said. "We'll get out with nothing except what we can carry. I'll run the jeep up on high ground, where it'll have a better chance of not being swamped."

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Kirby's voice cracked a little when he said, "Lucky if we get out with our hides."

Harmon turned on him angrily. "Shut up! Pull yourself together. I'll go up to high ground, where I can see far enough to pick a way and keep us from wasting any more time barging into dead ends."

His confidence quieted incipient panic. Eileen took his hand.

"Come on, Wade," she said, "let's go. You know every inch of ground around here."

"No, darling—you stay here. It's going to be pretty rough where I'm heading." He grinned. "Be nice if you twisted an ankle and I had to carry you."

He could not tell Eileen that he was now certain Agni was bent on destroying her—that she, of all the party, should come no nearer the cone than absolutely necessary. On the heels of this dreadful knowledge came that which told him why these people hemmed him in. They knew by instinct that he had reason for not fearing as they feared. He was not surprised when they refused to wait for him to reconnoiter.

"Don't try to get shed of us," Kirby cried and Voerhaven said, "We're going to be right on hand so we can go through the minute you pick a clear way."

Though the sun was now low it did not even make a red blob. The curtain of steam and dust was quite too dense and there was an ever-thickening pall of smoke from trees that burned as lava girdled them.

"One puff of hot gas and you're knocked out for keeps," he warned them. "For one to risk it is enough."

Nevertheless they persisted in following him. When he came to the edge of the old lava flow he repeated his warning. Lorella cried hysterically, "Don't let him get away! He wouldn't be here now if he didn't have some trick with that volcano. He must have a power!"

Her panic infected the men. They seized him by the arms before he could resist. During the futile attempt to shake them off the pistol in Harmon's pocket jammed against Kirby, who cried. "Don't you try to use that gun!" and dipped in, taking it. "Twist his wrist!"

"Oh, take it, you damned fool!" Harmon said quietly and relaxed. "I don't mind. You'd not use it on me regardless."

They released him. Kirby let the weapon slide back into Harmon's pocket. He looked shamefaced and embarrassed.

"Listen, you!" Harmon said. "The both of you. And you, Lorella. Why would I run out on you?"

"Because—because of what we did."

"Would I leave Eileen here?" He stepped to the girl's side. She had stood apart, the calmest by far of the four who had come with Harmon. "There *is* a way out, my dear," he said to her. "But I have to pick it myself. I have to get close to the flow before I can climb

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up to where I can see the way and give you all the direction.

"It'll be tough going. I can't have you all milling around. It may be touch-and-go. I've been over the ground so often I know every inch of it—but you, any or all of you, might kill yourselves in one flash of panic."

"I understand," Eileen said quietly.

She thought she understood, though he knew she actually was far indeed from understanding. And to him the knowledge was very good.

"Try to keep those fools off my heels!" he said.

He went to a vantage point much nearer than the one to which he had told them he must go. Actually that spot, just within sight of the dunes, was high enough for his purpose, high enough for him to see that there was but one way out. Yet that one way was something he could not possibly explain to them.

On the face of it there seemed to them no good reason why they could not all climb up the cone until they were far above the vents at the base, from which the fumes and lava came, and then circle until they could descend to that portion of the shelf which, as far as he could tell, was not lava-flooded.

As far as he could tell—by his five senses, that was, or by anyone else's—yet he was sure that the logical route was no longer open. Even if it were a single upsurge could and surely would block it. The ever-widening reach of the viscous red flow he did see told him of all the unseen possibilities.

Only by the grace of Agni Deva could any of his companions escape. The lady of fire was stalking them. She had weapons other than mere lava. A blast of gas, hot as the earth's very heart, could accomplish her will. Any attempt to outwit her would fail from the very start. But she would meet fair dealing with a fair answer.

VIII

Harmon retraced his steps. "Wait right here," he said easily. "I have a hunch but before I play it I have to go pretty high up on the cone to make sure I'm not leading you into a pocket."

"You think we're crazy?" Kirby shouted. "Wasting all that time while you come back to tell us?"

"I'll wave—I'll beckon you up."

"Well, why wait? We're taking no chances."

Lorella cried, "You're trying to get even with us! You're going to talk to Merah and have us all killed. You *do* have a power! You quieted her before—why don't you do it again? You're working against us. We're staying so close to you that whatever happens to us will happen to you."

She caught him with both hands, clawing him by the shirt, digging her fingers into his shoulders. She went on, "Take Eileen with us, grab her! He won't let her get hurt."

Tainted by Lorella's frenzy, Kir-

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by and Voerhaven snatched Eileen by the arms. She did not resist. Harmon sat down, taking Lorella with him.

"Then you'll have to carry *me*," he said. "You don't have the manpower for that." Shaking himself loose from Lorella he got out a cigarette and with steady hand touched light to it. "You're all in more of a hurry than I am. Do as I say or take your chances."

They released Eileen and stepped well away from her. Harmon went to her, caught her hand, drew her close. He lowered his voice, though there was hardly any need of this because of the incessant hiss and rumble. Great lumps of incandescent lava, blown up from the spreading pools by surges of gas, rocketed up, and dropped back, splashing fiery liquid.

"Don't follow me," he said. "Whatever else you do, don't follow. You'll be awfully scared when they all flock after me but trust me. I know what I'm doing. Stay right where you are. You'll come out of it—I promise you that."

"You *are* going to talk to Merah," Eileen said. "You're going to bring her a gift. Offer her one from me. Tell her that if she spares you I'll go away. You and I will never see each other again. We'll always have our beautiful few days and nights to remember. But you forget them if Merah wants you to. She can't care at all what *I* remember."

Eileen pressed close. Her kiss was unlike any of all the lovers' kisses they had exchanged. Harmon stood back, his hands lying for a moment on her shoulders. "Just wait and don't worry. And stand fast."

Harmon turned to climb. As he expected Lorella and the two men crowded on his heels. He bent into the zigzagging course, following the tracks he had made in the past. Finally, stopping for breath, he looked back to wave to Eileen. She returned the gesture but kept her place.

He said to the others, "We're getting close, too close. Stay here! With my game leg ready to let me down, how the hell can I get away from you?"

He looked back again. Eileen had left her place. Explosions showered a fiery rain about her, driving her from what had been a safe spot. She stumbled and lurched to her knees.

"Fumes are getting her," Harmon said. "But she'll be all right when the wind changes."

Kirby let out a strangled cry. "You told her—come on, Dirk! We've got to give her a hand!"

Harmon knew that his moment had come. He looked up toward the crater's rim. "Agni Deva!" he called. "I'm coming back to take the way of fire—the way of no returning!"

As if to challenge him, there came from the thus-far quiet crater great plumes of flame, which rose and then bowed their crests. They lapped over the rim and down, reaching like many eager arms. The

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heat was such as Harmon had never imagined. The colors covered the entire range of the spectrum. There were bands of blankness, as though composed of colors that passed beyond what the human eye could perceive.

He stretched out both arms. He took another step and despite the blasting breath which reached far beyond the tips of a million wavering fingers he found the breath to call, "Agni Deva! I come to take the way of fire—the way of no returning!"

He fancied he could smell the scorching of his hair and his garments though he was not sure of this. But there was flame on his head. He took another step with legs fresh and strong and unwearied. "Agni Deva—I come to take . . ."

Then there was coolness and flame lapped him like rippling of water. Where there had been voids in the bands of color he now perceived the octaves beyond violet and the octaves below red—zone after zone, color after color for which he had no name, of which no human had ever had experience, even in dreams.

In that vortex of fire stood Agni Deva, all splendid and smiling. The first touch of her fingers, as he took her outstretched hand, was intolerably painful. He experienced at once heat and cold and shock of lightning. Then he was beside her and at ease.

"There is no returning," Agni Deva said. "And you will never wish to return for now you see me without veils. You know what fire is by direct knowledge."

Harmon said out of his contentment, "And know how *being* goes far beyond *doing*."

What he had done, he now knew, was trifling compared to what he had become. Being so nearly one with Agni Deva he could not be sure whether it was her thought or his own that next came to him—that there was no separateness between them at all.

Agni Deva said, "Look back, look down, and see that I did not hurt her nor the rice either."

He saw Eileen plainly. He did not ask what had happened to Lorella and Kirby. Voerhaven was safe and Harmon was glad for this, glad also that Eileen's lurking surmises had blossomed into knowledge during their final moment together, so that while she could never know all, she knew enough.

"She knows," Agni Deva said, "and she has accepted. She will remember but she cannot mourn for she knows—as much as she need." And then, as they made for the dark bulwarks of the crater, she added, "This will be good, Wade, and better than you think. There'll be the rice to watch and ever so much more. Because *being* isn't a matter of standing still at all, it's an everlasting *becoming*."

Harmon smiled reminiscently and said, "*The Gods were once what man now is and man one day will be what Gods now are.*"

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the maugham obsession

by . . . August Derleth

All inventors seek success. Some few achieve it. And now and then a Quintus Maugham is a bit too successful for his own health.

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN A moot point with me," said Harrigan one evening over a glass of sherry at the Cliffdwellers' Club, "whether or not there is such a thing as a man's being too successful. I always think of Quintus Maugham."

"You have the advantage of me," I said.

"By rights he should have been famous," Harrigan went on, warming to his subject, "but things don't always work out that way. He was a plodding inventor obsessed by an idea. What inventor isn't, given a modicum of success? Perhaps he was a product of his time for Maugham's obsession was robots."

"The principle's sound enough."

"Oh, yes. It could be practical, to. After all, machines have been operated by mechanical men or mechanical brains for years. So Maugham's idea wasn't out of line. The operation didn't work out according to Hoyle, however. Maugham was one of those gaunt earnest men, a tall fellow with deep-set eyes and an habitually grim mouth. He took himself very seriously and you were always just a little embarrassed when he tried

What is a Derleth? The question pops up frequently in fantasy circles. The general consensus seems to be that a Derleth is a sort of human windmill that plucks finished manuscripts from the breeze while waving its arms in circles, printing and publishing same with its own machinery. In truth the Derleth output is prodigious, as it has been for many a year . . . enough to keep rolling the presses of his own publishing firm (Arkham) as well as to keep other publishers well supplied. Here is top-flight Derleth.

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to explain something to you—you felt that he so badly wanted your understanding."

He paused and sipped his sherry, looking reflectively out over the silvery lake.

"Where'd you meet him?" I asked. "On assignment?"

"Oh, he'd invented a little gadget connected with the recoil mechanism for the military so I was sent over to his place for an interview—the usual thing. He lived in a nice old house in Oak Park, left him by his mother and he lived pretty well, if a little on the frugal side. He was considerate and courteous, which is a damned sight more than you can say for most of the people a reporter gets to see.

"He gave me everything I wanted to know and a good deal more besides. He wound up with a half apologetic question about his newest invention—would I like to see it? I said I would so he took me down into one of the most elaborate private laboratories I've ever seen and introduced me to Herman."

"Ah, another character," I said, pouring more sherry into his glass.

"Herman was his robot. A neat well-oiled scrupulously-clean mechanical man in the process of being born. He was run by electrical impulses and was a good deal more self-sufficient than the traditional pushbutton robot of an earlier day. Even though he wasn't quite 'born' yet Herman did a turn or two for us, up and down the laboratory, with a precision that was almost military.

"Unlike most robots of that day Herman had a physiognomy carefully moulded after a human face. He looked damnably real. He could blink his glass eyes, he could shake hands, he could nod and, because of the mobility of his plastic rubber face, he could even smile after a fashion, though I always thought his smile a little grim.

"'The next step is to make him talk,' Maugham said. 'I believe it can be done.'

"'Can he hear?' I asked.

"'That will come,' he said.

"He seemed so sure of himself that I was almost inclined to believe him until of course I remembered all the others who had been so sure of themselves. That seems to be a characteristic of my queer people—each one has an unlimited belief in his own particular delusion.

"Well, Maugham put Herman through his paces and it was certainly novel to watch. He asked me not to write anything about Herman for publication and I didn't. I figured I owed him that courtesy. He had great plans for Herman, he explained—he meant Herman to be his general factotum and planned to perfect the robot as the housewife's dream. If I'd had to guess I'd have said he might accomplish as much.

"Well, I examined Herman inside and out. It was uncanny, the resemblance he bore to a human being. It was Maugham's conceit to dupli-

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cate as nearly as possible the organs and characteristics of the human body. That still left room for the complicated machinery necessary. The skeleton was of steel with a plastic overlay carefully moulded into the shape of a man approximately six feet high and weighing about two hundred pounds.

"Over the entire structure he had stretched a kind of plastic-rubber made to resemble human skin in color and texture. There were doors in both front and back of course—to allow Maugham to service his robot, inspect the machinery, charge and replace the batteries, oil the parts and so forth."

"He could almost have patented that as a bachelor's companion," I suggested.

Harrigan took another draught of sherry and smiled reminiscently. "His enthusiasm was infectious until I got out into the open air and started thinking about Herman's practicability. Then of course Herman slid back to his proper plane and I saw Maugham in a more balanced perspective. He struck me then as another little man with ideas just a trifle too big for them.

"In the ordinary course of events I wouldn't have seen Maugham again but about a month later he came up with another of those military valuable gadgets and I went out to get a propaganda story for Army Intelligence. I thought at the time that Maugham looked a little harassed but he was as cooperative as before when he knew what I wanted and he came through with just the right stuff for Army Intelligence.

"After we had finished I casually asked, 'And how's Herman?'

"He brightened a little and said that Herman was coming along fine. Forthwith he left the room and came back with his robot. He had put clothes on him and for a minute, candidly, I didn't know it was Herman.

"Maugham came up behind him and Herman said, 'Good day, Master.'

"Of course, his voice had a flat sort of scratchy sound, like a phonograph, and there was no inflection of any kind but it was undeniably speech.

" 'Can he hear?' I asked.

"Maugham nodded. 'He responds to an auditory mechanism very similar in principle to an electric eye. But he's far from perfect, Mr. Harrigan, very far.'

" 'I'd say he was pretty good myself,' I said.

"But Maugham only shook his head.

" 'What's the trouble?' I asked.

" 'He's too mechanical,' said Maugham.

" 'You couldn't expect him to be human.'

" 'No, but a little more human than he is,' Maugham answered.

"I had my doubts but I kept them to myself. After all I'm just a reporter. I've seen a lot of things I never dreamed were possible but none of them has warped my ob-

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jectivity. Maybe he could make Herman more human but I doubted that he could.

"Herman looked as human as a typical product of the Prussian military machine. If he'd come in saluting and saying 'Heil, Hitler!' you could almost have believed in his humanity—if you'd call it that, all things considered. So I held my tongue and watched Herman.

"That robot could move around and get things for Maugham—an ashtray, his bedroom slippers, a tray with a decanter and glasses on it. He could dust things but he was pretty awkward at that and now and then knocked something over. Maugham had removed all the breakables, I noticed, so no harm was done. I saw Maugham watching Herman with undeniable triumph and self-satisfaction but nevertheless there was an undercurrent of doubt in his eyes.

"He never said a thing, however, to follow through. It was just in the way I felt, as if this triumph and self-satisfaction were somehow watered by some question he did not care to voice. I knew intuitively too that whatever it was could not readily be drawn from him. But I felt it like something tangible and, curiously—which is a testimony to his inventive skill—I felt it to be something personal between him and his robot.

"Just what was going on in his mind it was impossible for me to find out, of course."

Maugham congratulated himself on his ability to maintain his composure in the face of the reporter's interest. He was definitely uneasy about Herman and it was only now, after Harrigan had gone, that he relaxed a little. For one thing Herman's responses were not quite what they should be—not so much on the negative side as on the positive. After Harrigan had gone he eyed Herman for some time in profound perturbation. If Maugham had to put his finger on the trouble he would be compelled to say that Herman was becoming somewhat too human for his own good.

His own attitude toward Herman was considerably more that of one man to another than of inventor to invention. It was not, thought Maugham, a good thing—it meant that Herman was in the process of becoming no longer just an invention but an obsession. Herman, meanwhile, stood immobile, waiting upon his command.

"Herman, go to the laboratory," said Maugham, enunciating each syllable with the clarity necessary to the precision machinery which was Herman's ear.

Was there hesitation in Herman's obedience? Maugham could not be sure and this very uncertainty troubled him all the more. But once moving Herman went forward with his customary smoothness, marching straight down to the laboratory and waiting there for Maugham, in whose breast pride was once more swelling at this concrete evidence

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of his inventive ingenuity. He recognized that Herman was indeed almost as perfect a machine as it was possible for man to conceive and bring into being.

He had some question now as to whether he could improve on Herman or not. Or whether indeed it would be wise. But his ambition overcome his qualms and, marshalling Herman, he went to work.

"The next time I ran into Maugham, I saw a badly jangled man," said Harrigan. "For one thing he looked as harassed as any man who was ever nagged by his ball-and-chain. For another he found it seemingly impossible to talk freely.

"'You're not looking so well,' I said to him.

"'No,' he agreed. 'I've been working.'

"'On Herman?'

"'I've worked on him enough,' he said ominously.

"I confess I wasn't particularly observant that morning. I knew something was bothering him but I knew too, as if by instinct, that he wasn't saying anything about it. I couldn't resist having a little fun with him.

"'Look,' I said, 'if you scientists get around to inventing life would it be necessary to rewrite the Bible?'

"He blinked at me, a little startled. 'Why, no,' he said, 'we're not in conflict with the Bible. It's organized religion that's in conflict with us.'

"'And the creation of life has nothing to do with it? I always thought that all conflicts and arguments came back to that basic point. Who was responsible—a Supreme Being or a process of evolution from dead matter?'

"'Listen,' he said, 'why are you asking me all this?'

"I noticed then how extremely nervous he was. He had taken hold of my arm and I could feel his hand trembling.

"'I'd like to know,' I answered, 'but it's not that important. Forget it. I'm a little dubious about the scientists anyway. Whether you worship Science or God sometimes gets to seem like six of one and a half-dozen of the other. Or do you think it's possible to create life, Maugham?'

"'I wonder,' he said. And nothing else.

"All this time we had been walking along toward his place. I noticed that his steps began to lag a trifle and the closer we got to his home the slower he walked. I gathered finally that for some reason he was reluctant about my coming but was much too courteous to say so.

"'As long as we're so close to your place,' I said at last, 'I might as well stop in and take another look at Herman.'

"He stopped short at that and showed his distress pretty plainly. A newspaperman has to be impervious to most emotion and I guess I was. I didn't bat an eyelash and let on I never saw a thing.

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"'I don't know in what shape the house is in,' he said then. 'I've forgotten just what I set Herman to doing.'

"'Well, we'll see,' I said.

"We went in. Maugham led the way, jittery as a confirmed tosspot too long gone without a drink."

"Which reminds me," I put in. "Will you have another, Harrigan?"

"Sure. But find something stronger," he said. "Well, we went in, as I said. I don't know what I had expected to see but there was nothing unusual about the place. It was spic and span. You'd think he'd had a housemaid working on it all day. And as for Herman—he was sitting in the living room in an easy chair that was clearly enough Maugham's own favorite.

"Maugham stared at his creation, as if he hadn't expected to see him there. 'Herman,' he said, 'go to the laboratory.'

"The robot got up without a sound—I had expected to hear creaks, the meshing of gears or something—and walked out of the room. Maugham sat down. I could see that he was sweating but he seemed relieved about something.

"'He looks perfected,' I said.

"'He's a very serviceable robot,' Maugham agreed. 'He certainly did himself proud on this room.'

"'You mean he cleaned it?' I asked.

"'Every foot of it,' he answered. 'I gave him his orders before I left the house.'

"'But I thought you didn't know what you'd find, what you'd set him to doing?'

"'Oh, I knew, all right. What I didn't know was what Herman might get to do. He's not quite perfect yet, you see, Mr. Harrigan.'

"I saw, all right. I saw that Herman had become his inventor's obsession in a very real sense. I felt sorry for him but I had known enough inventors to understand what had happened. They work so much alone they're apt to overemphasize the importance of their work. The same thing holds true for authors and composers, I suppose. They lose perspective—it's little more than that.

"And my friend Maugham seemed to have lost his."

Maugham was relieved at Harrigan's going. He sat for a few moments after the door had closed behind the reporter. But in a moment his relief gave way before an attitude of listening. Was there movement? Did he hear shuffling footsteps? Or was it again his imagination?

He walked across to the door through which Herman had disappeared. There he stood for a moment more, listening. He was undeniably nervous. He wondered whether Harrigan had seen or not. In final analysis perhaps it made no difference. He opened the door.

Herman stood there, immobile. For a ludicrous moment Maugham thought that his robot had been listening at the door even as he

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himself had been. But of course that was impossible. If only he could remember what he had done to Herman the last time he had worked on the complicated and delicate mechanism of the robot! He was convinced that something had happened, something which had given Herman considerably more animation than had been either planned or foreseen.

There was of course one solution, though he hesitated to resort to it since it involved undoing everything he had done. He could take Herman apart again and find out just how he functioned so well. He would have been ashamed to confess to Harrigan or anyone else that he was candidly perplexed at Herman's abilities.

He stepped across the threshold, brushing past the motionless robot, and turned at the door to the laboratory stairs. "Come, Herman," he said.

The robot did not move.

"Herman, go to the laboratory," said Maugham in a firm clear voice.

Still no move.

He remembered abruptly that he had given Herman this order before when Harrigan was still in the house. Apparently then Herman had not obeyed the order at that time. Something was wrong with the auditory mechanism.

He came back to the robot's side and tried once more. Herman's mechanical arms came up, his fingers opened and closed on Maugham's arm. He held him immobile.

"Stop!" commanded Maugham angrily.

Herman held on.

"Put me down," said Maugham.

Herman released him. His arms once again fell laxly to his sides. He stood there, unblinking, apparently waiting upon his next command.

"Go to the laboratory," said Maugham again.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, the robot's head turned and shook his refusal.

Maugham stared, aghast. He was at a loss for word or deed.

"I never saw Maugham around again after that," continued Harrigan. "He virtually went into seclusion and no one saw him at his old haunts. Not that he'd been in the habit of moving around a good deal—he hadn't. But now, abruptly, he appeared to give up all his customary walks and visits and to retire into his house.

"You get used to situations like that involving inventive or creative people of course. You think nothing of it. I didn't, I know, though I was possessed of some curiosity about Herman. But out in his neighborhood, where people knew nothing about Herman, certain rumors began to circulate—that Maugham had hired an assistant, and that the assistant now did all Maugham's errands for him. And so on . . .

"I happened on a description of his assistant one afternoon and it

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sounded pretty much like Herman. I was amused at the way in which people can get things balled up. They do, you know. Take any court, any trial—the so-called 'circumstantial evidence,' correctly interpreted, is the most effectively damning. Eyewitness accounts vary as much as the weather and are as unreliable actually.

"So that too passed over me.

"I think it was about two months after I had last seen Maugham that I learned of his plans to move west. It was entirely an accident. I happened to be in the circulation department one morning when the circulation manager of the paper got a letter from Maugham asking him to change his address.

"'You know that fellow Maugham, don't you, Harrigan?' asked Howells.

"'Sure,' I said. 'What's he been up to now?'

"'Don't know. He's moving away.'

"He gave me the change of address as of the first of the coming month. I looked at his crisp letter and saw that Maugham was planning to pull up stakes for the west. It had the look of pretty isolated country in Nevada. It was only a week until the first and I thought that if I had time I'd look in on Maugham before he went.

"So next morning, being in the neighborhood, I went out of my way a little to call on him. I rang his bell several times before I got an answer. Then it was only the tentative opening of the door on a chain. Maugham's head appeared in the opening.

"'Good morning,' I said. 'How's the inventing business?'

"'You'll have to ask Mr. Maugham,' he said.

"'That's just what I'm doing,' I said.

"'Oh, yes. Well, I'm busy now,' he answered.

"I could see that he was. He was wearing some sort of cap as if to keep his hair dust-free—he was carrying a broom—and he had an apron tied round his middle. Plainly he was getting ready to take his leave. Remembering his agitation at our last meeting I looked for more of the same. But instead there was only a kind of weary apathy. If he was nervous at sight of me he didn't show it. I could see that he didn't intend to let me in if he could help it and this time the chain across the door was an argument I couldn't very well get around.

"'How's Herman?' I asked.

"'I'm fine,' he said in a flat voice.

"'Herman,' I said, 'your robot!'

"'Oh, yes,' he answered. 'Herman's fine. He can do just about everything now.'

"'Well in that case it's up to you to invent a mate for him,' I said.

"He grinned in a sickly way and started to back into the house.

"'Hold on,' I cried. 'What's all this about your going to Nevada?'

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"'We're leaving next week,' he said. 'Change of air—change of scene.'

"'Are you taking Herman?' I asked.

"'Certainly. It's for his benefit.'

"'Oh, I see. He's still not quite perfect?'

"He shook his head and echoed, 'Not quite perfect!' in a voice as flat as that of his robot.

"'Are you going to perfect him?' I asked.

"'Would you?' he asked.

"'Sure,' I said. 'I'd make him better and better.'

"'Beyond one point you couldn't go,' he said.

"'And what's that?'

"'You couldn't give him a soul—unless you could slip him your own,' he said.

"This time he did back well into the house. I stuck my foot into the doorway so that he couldn't close the door. At the same time I got a glimpse past him. His front door opened directly into his main room, his living room, and I could see that someone was standing there waiting for him—a tallish fellow with one arm folded across his chest and supporting his elbow, one hand cupping his chin. He seemed impatient but of course I couldn't see that clearly.

"If it hadn't been so absurdly impossible I'd have sworn the fellow was Herman. But of course it was undoubtedly Maugham's new assistant. For once the local gadabouts had the story straight."

"And did he move?" I asked.

"Oh yes. He went on schedule—*with* his assistant. I don't know what became of Herman in the exodus. Presumably he moved with them because he turned up in Nevada with Maugham. But I saw no sign of him when I watched Maugham from a distance boarding the train. I suppose Herman could have been taken apart and shipped on ahead. Then he could have been reassembled and set to working again."

"But how do you know Herman went along to Nevada?" I asked, pouring Harrigan yet another drink.

"By one of those ridiculous mistakes the newspapers sometimes make. Maugham hadn't been out west two months before a flash flood tore through the village in which he'd set up housekeeping and inventing. Maugham was one of the victims. The paper nearest there carried a picture of Maugham and his robot, which by that time was public property out there.

"But by one of those odd accidents of the press the names under the pictures had been transposed—under Herman's picture appeared Maugham's name, and under Maugham's Herman's. And to carry the mistake to the epitome of the ludicrous I'm damned if Maugham didn't look exactly like a robot and Herman just like a man!"

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the other tiger

by . . . Arthur C. Clarke

When a pair of strollers begin to ponder parallel worlds just about anything can happen. And this time about anything does.

IT'S AN INTERESTING theory," said Arnold, "but I don't see how you can ever prove it." They had come to the steepest part of the hill and for a moment Webb was too breathless to reply.

"I'm not trying to," he said when he had gained his second wind. "I'm only exploring its consequences."

"Such as?"

"Well, let's be perfectly logical and see where it gets us. Our only assumption, remember, is that the universe is infinite."

"Right. Personally I don't see what else it *can* be."

"Very well. That means there must be an infinite number of stars and planets. Therefore, by the laws of chance, every possible event must occur not merely once but an infinite number of times. Correct?"

"I suppose so."

"Then there must be an infinite number of worlds *exactly like Earth,* each with an Arnold and Webb on it, walking up this hill just as we are doing now, saying these same words."

"That's pretty hard to swallow."

"I know it's a staggering thought—but so is infinity. The thing that interests me, though, is the idea of all those other Earths that aren't

The current head-man of the august British Interplanetary Society has recently been devoting himself to scientific writing. But once in a while he can still cut loose.

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exactly the same as this one. The Earths where Hitler won the War and the Swastika flies over Buckingham Palace—the Earths where Columbus never discovered America—the Earths where the Roman Empire has lasted to this day. In fact the Earths where all the great *if's* of history had different answers."

"Going right back to the beginning, I suppose, to the one in which the apeman who would have been the daddy of us all, broke his neck before he could have any children?"

"That's the idea. But let's stick to the worlds we know—the worlds containing *us* climbing this hill on this spring afternoon. Think of all our reflections on those millions of other planets. Some of them are exactly the same but every possible variation that doesn't violate the laws of logic must also exist.

"We could—we *must*—be wearing every conceivable sort of clothes—and no clothes at all. The Sun's shining here but on countless billions of those other Earths it's not. On many it's winter or summer here instead of spring. But let's consider more fundamental changes too.

"We intend to walk up this hill and down the other side. Yet think of all the things that might possibly happen to us in the next few minutes. However improbable they may be, as long as they are *possible*, then somewhere they've got to happen."

"I see," said Arnold slowly, absorbing the idea with obvious reluctance. An expression of mild discomfort crossed his features. "Then somewhere, I suppose, you will fall dead with heart failure when you've taken your next step."

"Not in *this* world." Webb laughed. "I've already refused it. Perhaps *you're* going to be the unlucky one."

"Or perhaps," said Arnold, "I'll get fed up with the whole conversation, pull out a gun and shoot you."

"Quite possibly," admitted Webb, "except that I'm pretty sure you, on this Earth, haven't got one. Don't forget, though, that in millions of those alternative worlds I'll beat you on the draw."

The path was now winding up a wooded slope, the trees thick on either side. The air was fresh and sweet. It was very quiet as though all Nature's energies were concentrated, with silent intentness, on rebuilding the world after the ruin of winter.

"I wonder," continued Webb, "how improbable a thing can get before it becomes impossible. We've mentioned some unlikely events but they're not completely fantastic. Here we are in an English country lane, walking along a path we know perfectly well.

"Yet in some universe those—what shall I call them?—*twins* of ours will walk around that corner and meet anything, absolutely any-

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thing that imagination can conceive. For as I said at the beginning, if the cosmos is infinite, then all possibilities must arise."

"So it's possible," said Arnold, with a laugh that was not quite as light as he had intended, "that we may walk into a tiger or something equally unpleasant."

"Of course," replied Webb cheerfully, warming to his subject. "If it's possible, then it's got to happen to someone, somewhere in the universe. So why not to us?"

Arnold gave a snort of disgust. "This is getting quite futile," he protested. "Let's talk about something sensible. If we don't meet a tiger round this corner I'll regard your theory as refuted and change the subject."

"Don't be silly," said Webb gleefully. "That won't refute anything. There's no way you can—"

They were the last words he ever spoke. On an infinite number of Earths an infinite number of Webbs and Arnolds met tigers friendly, hostile or indifferent. But this was not one of those Earths—it lay far closer to the point where improbability urged on the impossible.

Yet of course it was not totally inconceivable that during the night the rain-sodden hillside had caved inward to reveal an ominous cleft leading down into the subterranean world. As for *what* had laboriously climbed up that cleft, drawn towards the unknown light of day —well, it was really no more unlikely than the giant squid, the boa-constrictor or the feral lizards of the Jurassic jungle. It had strained the laws of zoological probability but not to the breaking-point.

Webb had spoken the truth. In an infinite cosmos everything must happen somewhere—including their singularly bad luck. For *it* was hungry—very hungry—and a tiger or a man would have been a small yet acceptable morsel to any one of its half dozen gaping mouths.

The theory of multiple worlds, with which Mr. Clarke has toyed so effectively and terrifyingly in the just-finished story above, is one of the most fascinating in the entire realm of speculative thought upon which science fiction is based. It goes by many names—among them parallel worlds, parallel time-tracks and even the broomstick theorem of space-time. The whole idea is based upon a more-or-less reasonable supposition that everything which happens in our world and universe could or can happen in several ways—and does so in an infinity of ever-branching cosmoses. Hence the unpleasantly hungry "tiger" in Mr. Clarke's hillside becomes quite unpleasantly reasonable. And while the whole idea of multiple worlds may seem absurdly and abstractively impractical to literal minds it might be well to remember that the A and H-bombs were mere metaphysical speculations until not so many years ago. Practical-minded folk would be wise to stay on guard.

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the small bears

by . . . Gene L. Henderson

The aliens looked cute as Koalas. But there was a little matter of a graveyard of dead space-ships.

BILLOWY WHITE CLOUDS hid the entire surface of the mystery planet and the space-cruiser cautiously searched, seeking an opening. A wind disturbance momentarily split the misty blanket and like an arrow the ship darted through.

The sudden movement had caught some of the men unprepared and Dr. Dick Boyette hurried past fully-manned battle stations to answer a call from the control-room. It required but a couple of minutes to revive a technician who had stumbled into a panel and afterward Boyette stood in the background, watching.

Everywhere, as far as the eye could see, the terrain was dotted by patches of woods and green meadows. The perpetual cloud blanket was two miles high, thin enough so that it barely diffused the sunlight. Enough, Boyette thought, so that the planet would have been a mystery even without the disappearance of all ships that had visited it.

"No sign of life," growled Commander Kellews, breaking the silence.

"I don't like it," the gunnery officer added uneasily. "There must be life or what could have happened to all the other ships that vanished here?"

A STORY THAT SHOWS WHAT PERIL MAY LIE UNDER A FUR COAT.

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"That's what we're here to find out," said Commander Kellews. He gazed around with a fighting man's pride in the finest weapons that Earth science had been able to devise. This one ship itself could destroy the entire planet that lay so peacefully beneath them.

As Boyette knew, the mystery planet was necessary for further expansion from the solar system, lying as it did between their system and the nearest one. Yet, it had swallowed all ships that had landed.

"*Look!*" shouted the lookout, "that plateau's covered with ships."

Brisk instructions were relayed throughout the craft. The crew readied for any possible emergency. The *Assault* cruised forward, turrets bearing on the targets now dead ahead.

"Why, those are Earth-ships!" Commander Kellows exclaimed.

"And that's the *Conquest!*" Boyette blurted, forgetting himself.

All eyes centered on the sleek heavy cruiser squatting on the ground. She was a sister ship of the *Assault* and the first Patrol craft sent to investigate the planet. Practically every man aboard the *Assault* had personally known someone on her crew.

Smoke trailing from the center of the plateau caused brief excitement among the watchers. Their hopes fell when it was seen to emanate from a small lake of boiling lava. The molten rock seethed and bubbled, an indication of the fiery core that lay beneath.

The *Assault* landed and search parties were immediately organized. There were only enough men left behind to adequately man the ship's defenses. Boyette was assigned to the main party after convincing the reluctant Commander that he might be needed.

All of the ships were empty. There was no sign of disorder or confusion. Tools and equipment had been left lying when their owners had quietly left. Not one clue could be found to account for the disappearance of their crews. A feeling of awe began to temper the initial exuberance of the crewmen.

The main party was almost ready to return to its ship when a movement at the edge of the plateau caught the attention of the men. They froze in their tracks, weapons ready, then a small animal crawled into sight. It stood only about a foot high and to Boyette resembled a small Teddy Bear.

Relieved the men relaxed and one laughed. At this the creature stood up even higher and barked softly, bringing others into sight. Squad leaders half-heartedly endeavored to keep their men together but the temptation was too great to resist. Each man wheedled and coaxed until the Teddy Bears had allowed themselves to be brought within reach.

Boyette alone stood aloof and one of the animals made its way towards him. It even avoided at-

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tempts by the crew members to catch it. In fact, Boyette noted, nowhere did he see more than one of the Bears to any one man. He frowned thoughtfully, remembering that there was no sign of any other form of life.

The animal stopped in front of him and waited expectantly. A desire to pet it crept over Boyette, one so strong that his hands tingled. He almost gave in to the impulse when a dark suspicion made him draw back. Why hadn't he felt the same emotion before the Bear had reached him?

One of the men noted his backward motion and yelled, "What's the matter, Doc, afraid that it'll bite you?"

Boyette only smiled by way of reply. The brief moment of introspection had served to strengthen his willpower. He determined from now on to look before leaping. Nothing was above suspicion until the mystery of the deserted spaceships had been solved.

Loud laughter caught his attention and brought a brief smile to his normally serious face. One of the men had been smoking and dropped some tobacco on an animal. It dug at its hide frantically in an effort to dislodge the particles. Once freed of the irritant it promptly made its way back to the same crew-member.

Boyette pondered the act. All of the Bears seemed to have a purpose in mind and the intelligence to direct it. There wasn't any biological reason a thinking and intelligent creature should have a human form. Perhaps . . . at least it was worth considering, Boyette mused.

He now became interested in a faint path leading towards the lake of molten rock. It appeared too large for the Bears and not too old. Besides, he reasoned, what would any living creature want at the lake? He followed the path to a high promontory overlooking the lake. He stood there, fascinated by the thought of the terrific energy necessary to melt the planet's substance itself.

There was a movement against his legs and he looked down. There was the same Teddy Bear that had followed him, rather than stay with its fellow creatures. The display of affection almost led him to lean over and stroke the beast. However he remembered his resolve barely in time and snapped erect. The desire disappeared immediately and he glared down at the Bear.

It appeared saddened and sat back on its haunches, searching his face with button-like black eyes. Again Boyette turned to the lake, reminded of the old swimming hole back home. Many a time he'd stood on its high bank, similar to this, then leaped far out to join the rest of the gang.

It looked so peaceful below, he thought. If one were to leap or fall, there'd be no pain. And to be released from the worries of life in such beautiful surroundings, who knew what wonderful existence

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might lie in store for him? He moved closer to the edge and tensed, ready to leap.

A lingering doubt crept into his mind, struggling to overcome the urge to jump. Would the others follow him? He forced his head around and saw them cavorting with the Teddy Bears on the grass below. The one that had followed him was standing erect, eagerly watching his every move.

His resolve to consider every action was smothered under. Once again he teetered on the lip of the rock, trying to edge back but finding that his muscles refused to obey. Fragments of thought flitted through his mind, each being erased after a brief flash.

All at once he remembered the Teddy Bear that had become so frantic at the tobacco that had fallen on it. Accustomed to analytical approaches to problems in the lab he suddenly wondered if the creatures were capable of implanting suggestions in human minds?

The mental struggle caused perspiration to break out in beads over his forehead. He slowly dug a heel into the dirt, then straining, scattered soil into the face of the animal behind him. Instantly it seemed as if bonds had been cut from his limbs and he recoiled in horror from the bubbling rock below.

Boyette shoved by the animal, frantically brushing dirt from its face and hide. It was now quite evident that the creatures needed full concentration to work their will. He also determined not to let himself fall under their power again.

At least he was convinced where the expedition's peril lay. He headed for the ship, determined to act now. Intent on his own thoughts he didn't see the figure that loomed up before him.

A hearty voice roared, "Well, Doctor, why the gloomy look on such a fine day?"

He looked up in surprise. The voice had come from Old Man Snead, Exec of the Patrol-ship. Not only was he astonished at being addressed by the dour old man but was almost made speechless by the sight of the Exec fondling one of the Teddy Bears.

"You won't find anyone there," Snead said. "Everything was so peaceful that the Skipper gave permission to all hands to alight." He stared at the Teddy Bear which refused to leave Boyette. "Nice looking pet you have there. Sure tame, aren't they?"

Boyette looked down and saw the Bear gazing up at him reproachfully. Again he felt an inclination to lean over and stroke the beast. He resisted with no difficulty as the Exec strolled off. With him went Boyette's last hope. The Exec's noted aversion to pets of any type had made him the man most likely to resist what appeared to be a suggestive hypnosis being applied by the alien beasts.

The subtle delving at his mind

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was still apparent but easier now to resist than at first. The capture of the Exec's will left no one to turn to, so a plan began to form in Boyette's mind—one which he must carry to completion all on his own.

He pretended to fall under the power of the Teddy Bear and leaned over, picking it up. To all outward appearances he was just as absorbed with it as the rest of the crew were with theirs. The only difference was that he promptly headed for the ship rather than out on the meadow with the others.

The ship did prove to be empty and he placed the Bear on a workbench in his lab. It sat watching intently, a gleam of intelligence every so often breaking through the innocent mask of blank innocence. Boyette moved around aimlessly, aware of the scrutiny and trying to appear busy. However the ruse was giving him an opportunity to think over his plan.

His main problem right now was to verify his suspicions. And the only way to do that would be through one of the animals itself. Then would follow the disclosure to the skipper and crew. First, though, they'd have to be released from their hypnosis.

A Brain Emanation Recorder would be just the thing of course. It was used to transmit the thought pictures of one mind to another. Its primary function was to detect brain deterioration caused by radiation in space but other experiments had been made. Pure thought knew no language barriers, so the difficulty didn't lie there. It was getting the Bear to cooperate. He could overpower it but its evident mental control would enable it to blank off its thoughts.

The crew would be returning before long and Boyette was becoming desperate. His gaze fell on a vial of the new Martian truth serum and the solution fell into place like tumblers in a lock. Still he had to be careful. Some Earth animals no larger than the Bears packed a pretty mean wallop when aroused or cornered.

A tray was blocking the cabinet so Boyette shoved it to one side. Immediately a shrill raw sound cut across his nerves like a hot knife. He saw where a protruding piece of the tray had scraped along the metallic table top. A low moan froze him and he saw that the Teddy Bear had squeezed against a wall and lay there quivering. The animal was seemingly in agony for a short while but quickly recovered and sat up.

Boyette frowned thoughtfully. Even though the aliens strongly resembled small bears, their characteristics were proving to be more like those of canines. At least he was learning more about them and might be able to put it to good use in the future.

He filled a hypodermic needle with the truth serum, not even so much as looking at the Bear down the work bench. Then, casually walking by the animal, he suddenly

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turned and grasped it by one hand. The creature exploded into action, almost knocking the needle from his hand. Boyette shifted his left hand to the loose skin around the neck of the animal. The needle was then efficiently planted at the base of the skull. There was a brief struggle, then the Bear slowly lay down, a glaze coming over its eyes. The effect would last for an hour, long enough for his purpose.

Boyette next obtained a magnetic recorder from the electronics lab. Speed was essential and he was thankful that the ship was empty. The recorder would enable him to save the innermost thoughts of the telepathic beasts. This would be necessary, he well knew, to convince a skeptical Commander Kellews of his suspicions.

His own lab contained the Brain Emanation Indicators. One cap was fitted over the erstwhile *pet*, the other over his own head. The recorder would transcribe the electrical waves so that they could be played back through the Analyzer at a later date.

The apparatus was still a recent enough invention to give Boyette a thrill whenever he used it. There was no actual exchange of words but the illusion made it seem that there had been. Neither had he ever *seen* a picture of what was being thought in another brain. Rather he sensed what the other would have said if he'd spoken in an understandable language. This would be very valuable in the communication between the alien's and his brains.

"What happened to crew-members of all the other Earth-ships on your planet?" was the first question Boyette put to the drugged creature.

"They all jumped into the lake of fire," came the reply.

"Why?" asked Boyette.

There was no hesitation in the Bear's return thought. "Because it was suggested by us and their minds were unable to resist. Our Council decided that it was the only way to save our planet from being overrun by the peoples of Earth."

"Then why haven't the members of this last Expedition suffered the same fate?" Boyette inquired.

"The Council has come to realise that the people of Earth will keep returning as long as they are able. Since we have developed a high mental science rather than the physical ones, sooner or later our secret would be discovered."

"What do you plan on doing?"

"The minds of Earthmen indicate a fondness for what they call pets. We have used that weak emotion as a means for their destruction. We'll be carried back to Earth where, by careful infiltration, we can cause destructive wars. Eventually it is planned that everyone on Earth will be destroyed, thus removing our danger at its source."

"What will—" At that moment he was interrupted by a clamor at the outer space-lock. A quick check disclosed an angry group of men

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led by Commander Kellews and the Exec.

Boyette cursed his stupidity in overlooking what should have been a glaring fact. The alien creatures had such a high degree of telepathic development that his had called for help when threatened. Only the quick action of the truth serum had prevented its fellow creatures from locating him instantly. Their control over the rest of the crew could even lead to his death if he were careless.

Quickly hiding the recorder Boyette went to the lock and opened it. The entire crew came pouring in, each man accompanied by one of the aliens.

"What have you been up to, Doctor?" demanded Commander Kellews belligerantly.

Boyette glanced around at the ring of hostile faces and replied, "Just some work in the lab, sir."

"Where's the animal you had?" asked Snead.

Boyette pretended surprise. "Why, in my lab."

"Bring him along," instructed the Skipper and Boyette was hustled into the lab with as many men as could squeeze their way in. The drugged alien was beginning to stir feebly and the others showed their agitation with short barks as they swarmed around him. Boyette tensed. He'd have to make a break for it against impossible odds, if they discovered that he possessed their secret plans.

He concealed a sigh of relief when the investigation again was applied through the Commander and the Exec. "What were you doing, Doctor?" Kellews asked.

"Just examining the animal, sir." Suddenly he felt inspired, "I thought what nice pets they'd make back on Earth and wanted to find out if their physical structure would permit space-travel."

The men's faces relaxed. Boyette knew his answer couldn't have been more satisfactory in view of the alien Council's plans. Still, he'd have to find some way of releasing the crew from its hypnosis before he dared reveal his discovery. He knew that the beasts' power over men depended upon full concentration. The aliens were meticulously clean and at the same time very similar to Earth canines in physical structure.

The Skipper—under compulsion from the alien attached to him—still seemed dissatisfied. "What's wrong with the creature now?" Kellews persisted.

"I injected a mild sedative to quiet it for examination."

"Wasn't that a little high-handed?" inquired the Exec testily.

Boyette carefully considered the question, realising it might be a trap. "Why, sir?" he asked. "I've examined the lower animals on other planets, even dissected them. Why should those on this planet be any different?"

Again the answer was correct. However the restless movements of the aliens indicated that his refer-

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ence to them as *lower animals* must have rankled their high intelligence.

"Well," growled the Exec, "Why don't you bring him out of it? And then forget about further experiments."

There was a possibility the alien might remember something damaging when it regained its full senses. But there was an immediate danger in not complying so Boyette made a great show of cooperation. His mind darted about, trying to figure a solution for his present dilemma. He could stall only for so long—then the aliens, by their use of suggestion, might resort to direct action. He shivered, thinking of the disappearance of all the crews of the ships lying outside.

Several of the aliens again moved restlessly and he hastened the revival of the one now on its feet. He felt more and more the despair of working all alone. He accidentally brushed against one of the trays and stopped. What had happened the last time he moved one of them? The scraping noise had hurt the alien, of course! There, then, lay the solution to his problem in releasing the crew.

Boyette almost groaned aloud. How could he ever be able to produce the shrill noise continuously enough to do any good? Even one of the supersonic dog-whistles would work—if he only had one. The distraction afforded by such a noise would bring about the crew's release. Or would the aliens' superior mentality enable them to overcome their aversion to high-pitched sounds? If they could and his purpose were diagnosed . . . Boyette preferred not to dwell on the possibility.

"What's the hold-up?" growled the Exec.

"I can't find my bottle of stimulant," Boyette replied.

His glance fell on the intercom microphone. He was desperate by now and his mind ran rapidly over the possibilities the mike opened. Every crewman was familiar with the fact that when one was opened in front of a speaker a shrill howl would result.

It was due to a feed-back of course but the important part was that the sound did result. The only drawback was that the position must be just right or he'd get nothing but a low growl. The mike was within reach so he casually moved it closer to the wall-mounted speaker.

He picked up the bottle he'd purposely overlooked until now and was reaching for the mike-button when a command was growled.

"Wait a minute!"

Boyette turned slowly and carefully to see the burly Exec bearing down on him. He considered staking everything on a quick movement but gave up the idea. If the mike wasn't in the proper position it would avail nothing.

"Yes?" he answered.

"What's in that bottle?" the Exec asked.

Boyette felt his pulse slow down

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to normal. "Just the stimulant I was looking for," he explained.

"Let's see it." The bottle changed hands and the Exec examined it carefully, finally returning it with a short, "All right."

Boyette moved the still groggy and doped alien closer to the microphone, then shot the stimulant into him. The reaction was quick in coming, the animal arose to its feet with a dazed look. The rest of the aliens clustered around, silent but obviously questioning by telepathy.

For the moment Boyette was unnoticed and with no sign of haste he depressed the mike-button. There was a low hum over the intercom system, almost inaudible. Evidently it was much louder to the ears of the aliens since several peered around uneasily for the source.

He moved the mike slightly and immediately a high-pitched wail broke out. Even Boyette flinched as it grated across his nerves but to the aliens it must have represented pure physical torture.

Those still being held by crewmembers tore frantically to be free, some even biting in their frantic haste. There was a confused milling about the room, then a mass exodus through the door and out the airlock.

The men inside were almost as rattled by the time Boyette had shut off the mike. He rushed to close the outer lock with every alien now outside the ship.

He returned to the lab and laughed at the bewildered expressions on rough-and-ready crewmen. Even the normally belligerant Exec meekly looked to him for an explanation. Boyette explained the train of events since the alien animals had been contacted and what had happened to the crews they had come seeking.

Only Commander Kellews questioned his explanation, sharply inquiring, "Just a moment. How could you discover all this?"

"I'll show you," Boyette said. Before long the amazed Commander was receiving the much amplified telepathic confession of the alien

At the end he grimly took off the helmet and announced, "Mr. Snead, have all hands go to their battle stations and stand by for takeoff. As soon as we're ready systematic destruction of every living thing on this planet will commence. Their invasion of Earth is going to backfire."

"Are you sure that such a policy of destruction would be wise, sir?" Boyette asked quietly.

The Exec's mouth dropped open in horrified astonishment at this questioning of a military order. The Commander raised a hand to forestall what he knew would be an outburst.

"That's all right, Mr. Snead. Since the Doctor was instrumental in saving all of us I believe he has a perfect right to raise an objection." He turned to Boyette, "Now

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then, why shouldn't we destroy them? After all they did their damndest to destroy us."

"Well, sir," began Boyette confidently. "This is the first alien intelligent life we've run across in our space expansion. What happens now could very well determine our relations with other forms of life contacted later on.

He paused, then added, "Actually they were just defending themselves against what they considered an invasion."

"But their superior mental powers could still be dangerous to any future colonization," argued the Commander. "How do we know they won't try it again?"

"We don't," Boyette said. "Unless we convince them that we intend no harm either to them or their planet."

Commander Kellews seized this eagerly. "But how could we ever believe them if they did agree? And what assurance have we that they'll even consider cooperating? They're tricky little devils."

"I've thought that out too," Boyette said. "It all came about as a result of my examination of the one I had in here. The animals are scrupulously clean—perhaps you noticed that?"

The Commander frowned briefly, then nodded in assent.

"Also," Boyette continued, "to control effectively a human's mind they require full concentration on the task. What I propose it the importation of common fleas from Earth. Judging by the complete absence of other forms of life I believe the lowly and ever-busy flea will be something entirely new in their life."

He grinned. "Gentlemen, have you ever watched a mongrel dog industriously rooting a flea from his hide? I believe you'll agree an alien would require quite a bit of willpower for these friendly little fellows to forget all about them."

"Well, it might just conceivably work," the Commander reluctantly agreed.

"I'd be willing to wager it would," insisted Boyette. "In addition it would leave our reputation intact. For full cooperation we could even distribute limited amounts of flea-powder. Enough so that they could remain comfortable but not enough that—in the event it should be cut off—their lives would become one long itching misery."

The old Exec chuckled. "*Boy!*" he roared, "You've got something. I've won a lot of battles in my life but this tops them all. This is the first time my side ever managed to win a major victory because the enemy went to the dogs!"

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martians come in clouds

by Philip K. Dick

Among Man's noblest dreams is that of making friendly contact with other world creatures. But dreams may become nightmares. . .

TED BARNES CAME IN all grim-faced and trembling. He threw his coat and newspaper over the chair. "Another cloud," he muttered. "A whole cloud of them! One was up on Johnson's roof. They were getting it down with a long pole of some kind."

Lena came and took his coat to the closet. "I'm certainly glad you hurried right on home."

"I get the shakes when I see one of them." Ted threw himself down on the couch, groping in his pockets for cigarettes. "Honest to God it really gets me."

He lit up, blowing smoke around him in a gray mist. His hands were beginning to quiet down. He wiped sweat from his upper lip and loosened his necktie. "What's for dinner?"

"Ham." Lena bent over to kiss him.

"How come? Some sort of occasion?"

"No." Lena moved back toward the kitchen door. "It's that canned Dutch ham your mother gave us. I thought it was about time we opened it."

Ted watched her disappear into the kitchen, slim and attractive in her bright print apron. He sighed, relaxing and leaning back. The quiet living room, Lena in the kitchen, the television set playing

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to itself in the corner, made him feel a little better.

He unlaced his shoes and kicked them off. The whole incident had taken only a few minutes but it had seemed much longer. An eternity—standing rooted to the sidewalk, staring up at Johnson's roof. The crowd of shouting men. The long pole. And . . .

. . . and *it*, draped over the peak of the roof, the shapeless gray bundle evading the end of the pole. Creeping this way and that, trying to keep from being dislodged.

Ted shuddered. His stomach turned over. He had stood fixed to the spot, gazing up, unable to look away. Finally some fellow running past had stepped on his foot, breaking the spell and freeing him. He had hurried on, getting away as fast as he could, relieved and shaken. Lord. . . !

The back door slammed. Jimmy wandered into the living room, his hands in his pockets. "Hi, Dad." He stopped by the bathroom door, looking across at his father. "What's the matter? You're all funny looking."

"Jimmy, come over here." Ted stubbed out his cigarette. "I want to talk to you."

"I have to go wash for dinner."

"Come here and sit down. Dinner can wait."

Jimmy came over and slid up onto the couch. "What's the matter? What is it?"

Ted studied his son. Round little face, tousled hair hanging down in his eyes. Smudge of dirt on one cheek. Jimmy was eleven. Was this a good time to tell him? Ted set his jaw grimly. Now was as good a time as any—while it was strong in his mind.

"Jimmy, there was a Martian up on Johnson's roof. I saw it on the way home from the bus depot."

Jimmy's eyes grew round. "A buggie?"

"They were getting it with a pole. A cloud of them's around. They come in clouds every few years." His hands were beginning to shake again. He lit another cigarette. "Every two or three years. Not as often as they used to. They drift down from Mars in clouds, hundreds of them. All over the world—like leaves." He shuddered. "Like a lot of dry leaves blowing down."

"Gosh!" Jimmy said. He got off the couch onto his feet. "Is it still there?"

"No, they were getting it down. Listen." Ted leaned toward the boy. "Listen to me—I'm telling you this so you'll stay away from them. If you see one of them you turn around and run as fast as you can. You hear? Don't go near it—stay away. Don't . . ."

He hesitated. "Don't pay any attention to it. You just turn around and run. Get somebody, stop the first man you see and tell him, then come on home. Do you understand?"

Jimmy nodded.

"You know what they look like.

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They showed you pictures at school. You must have—"

Lena came to the kitchen door. "Dinner's ready. Jimmy, aren't you washed?"

"I stopped him," Ted said, getting up from the couch. "I wanted to have a talk with him."

"You mind what your father tells you," Lena said. "About the buggies—remember what he says or he'll give you the biggest whipping you ever heard of."

Jimmy ran to the bathroom. "I'll get washed." He disappeared, slamming the door behind him.

Ted caught Lena's gaze. "I hope they get them taken care of soon. I hate even to be outside."

"They should. I heard on television they're more organized than last time." Lena counted mentally. "This is the fifth time they've come. The fifth cloud. It seems to be tapering off. Not as often, any more. The first was in nineteen hundred and fifth-eight. The next in fifty-nine. I wonder where it'll end."

Jimmy hurried out of the bathroom. "Let's eat!"

"Okay," Ted said. "Let's eat."

It was a bright afternoon with the sun shining down everywhere. Jimmy Barnes rushed out of the schoolyard, through the gate and onto the sidewalk. His heart was hammering excitedly. He crossed over to Maple Street and then onto Cedar, running the whole way.

A couple of people were still poking around on Johnson's lawn—a policeman and a few curious men. There was a big ruined place in the center of the lawn, a sort of tear where the grass had been ripped back. The flowers all around the house had been trampled flat. But there was no sign whatsoever of the buggie.

While he was watching Mike Edwards came over and punched him on the arm. "What say, Barnes."

"Hi. Did you see it?"

"The buggie? No."

"My Dad saw it, coming home from work."

"Bull!"

"No, he really did. He said they were getting it down with a pole."

Ralf Drake rode up on his bike. "Where is it? Is it gone?"

"They already tore it up," Mike said. "Barnes says his old man saw it, coming home last night."

"He said they were poking it down with a pole. It was trying to hang onto the roof."

"They're all dried-up and withered," Mike said, "like something that's been hanging out in the garage."

"How do you know?" Ralf said.

"I saw one once."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

They walked along the sidewalk, Ralf wheeling his bike, discussing the matter loudly. They turned down Vermont Street and crossed the big vacant lot.

"The TV announcer said most of them are already rounded up," Ralf

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said. "There weren't very many this time."

Jimmy kicked a rock. "I'd sure like to see one before they get them all."

"I'd sure like to *get* one," Mike said.

Ralf sneered. "If you ever saw one you'd run so fast you wouldn't stop until the sun set."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You'd run like a fool."

"The heck I would. I'd knock the ol' buggie down with a rock."

"And carry him home in a tin can?"

Mike chased Ralf around, out into the street and up to the corner. The argument continued endlessly all the way across town and over to the other side of the railroad tracks. They walked past the ink works and the Western Lumber Company loading platforms. The sun sank low in the sky. It was getting to be evening. A cold wind came up, blowing through the palm trees at the end of the Hartly Construction Company lot.

"See you," Ralf said. He hopped on his bike, riding off. Mike and Jimmy walked back toward town together. At Cedar Street they separated.

"If you see a buggie give me a call," Mike said.

"Sure thing." Jimmy walked on up Cedar Street, his hands in his pockets. The sun had set. The evening air was chill. Darkness was descending.

He walked slowly, his eyes on the ground. The streetlights came on. A few cars moved along the street. Behind curtained windows he saw bright flashes of yellow, warm kitchens and living rooms. A television set brayed out, rumbling into the gloom. He passed along the brick wall of the Pomeroy Estate. The wall turned into an iron fence. Above the fence great silent evergreens rose dark and unmoving in the evening twilight.

For a moment Jimmy stopped, kneeling down to tie his shoe. A cold wind blew around him, making the evergreens sway slightly. Far off a train sounded, a dismal wail echoing through the gloom. He thought about dinner, Dad with his shoes off, reading the newspaper. His mother in the kitchen—the TV set murmuring to itself in the corner—the warm, bright living room.

Jimmy stood up. Above him in the evergreens something moved. He glanced up, suddenly rigid. Among the dark branches something rested, swaying with the wind. He gaped, rooted to the spot.

A buggie. Waiting and watching, crouched silently up in the tree.

It was *old*. He knew that at once. There was a dryness about it, an odor of age and dust. An ancient gray shape, silent and unmoving, wrapped around the trunk and branches of the evergreen. A mass of cobwebs, dusty strands and webs of gray wrapped and trailing across the tree. A nebulous wispy presence

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that made the hackles of his neck rise.

The shape began to move but so slowly he might not have noticed. It was sliding around the trunk, feeling its way carefully, a little at a time. As if it were sightless, blind. Feeling its way inch by inch, an unseeing gray ball of cobwebs and dust.

Jimmy moved back from the fence. It was completely dark. The sky was black above him. A few stars glittered distantly, bits of remote fire. Far down the street a bus rumbled, turning a corner.

A buggie—clinging to the tree above him. Jimmy struggled, pulling himself away. His heart was thumping painfully, choking him. He could hardly breathe. His vision blurred, fading and receding. The buggie was only a little way from him, only a few yards above his head.

Help—he had to get help. Men with poles to push the buggie down—people—right away. He closed his eyes and pushed away from the fence. He seemed to be in a vast tide, a rushing ocean dragging at him, surging over his body, holding him where he was. He could not break away. He was caught. He strained, pushing against it. One step . . . another step . . . a third—

And then he heard it.

Or rather *felt* it. There was no sound. It was a drumming, a kind of murmuring like the sea, inside his head. The drumming lapped against his mind, beating gently around him. He halted. The murmuring was soft, rhythmic. But insistent—urgent. It began to separate, gaining form—form and substance. It flowed, breaking up into distinct sensations, images, scenes.

Scenes—of another world, *its* world. The buggie was talking to him, telling him about its world, spinning out scene after scene with anxious haste.

"Get away," Jimmy muttered thickly.

But the scenes still came, urgently, insistently, lapping at his mind.

Plains—a vast desert without limit or end. Dark red, cracked and scored with ravines. A far line of blunted hills, dust-covered, corroded. A great basin off to the right, an endless empty piepan with white-crusted salt rimming it, a bitter ash where water had once lapped.

"Get away!" Jimmy muttered again, moving a step back.

The scenes grew. Dead sky, particles of sand, whipped along, carried endlessly. Sheets of sand, vast billowing clouds of sand and dust, blowing endlessly across the cracked surface of the planet. A few scrawny plants growing by rocks. In the shadows of the mountains great spiders with old webs, dust-covered, spun centuries ago. Dead spiders, lodged in cracks.

A scene expanded. Some sort of artificial pipe, jutting up from the red-baked ground. A vent—underground quarters. The view changed. He was seeing below, down into the

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core of the planet—layer after layer of crumpled rock. A withered wrinkled planet without fire or life or moisture of any kind. Its skin cracking, its pulp drying out and blowing up in clouds of dust. Far down in the core a tank of some sort—a chamber sunk in the heart of the planet.

He was inside the tank. Buggies were everywhere, sliding and moving around. Machines, construction of different kinds, buildings, plants in rows, generators, homes, rooms of complex equipment.

Sections of the tank were closed off—bolted shut. Rusty, metal doors—machinery sinking into decay—valves closed, pipes rusting away—dials cracked and broken. Lines clogged—teeth missing from gears—more and more sections closed. Fewer buggies—fewer and fewer . . .

The scene changed. Earth, seen from a long way off—a distant green sphere, turning slowly, cloud-covered. Broad oceans, blue water miles deep—moist atmosphere. The buggies drifting through empty reaches of space, drifting slowly toward Earth, year after year. Drifting endlessly in the dark wastes with agonizing slowness.

Now Earth expanded. The scene was almost familiar. An ocean surface, miles of foaming water, a few gulls above, a distant shore line. The ocean, Earth's ocean. Clouds wandering above in the sky.

On the surface of the water flat spheres drifted, huge metal discs. Floating units, artificially built, several hundred feet around. Buggies rested silently on the discs, absorbing water and minerals from the ocean under them.

The buggie was trying to tell him something, something about itself. Discs on the water—the buggies wanted to use the water, to live on the water, on the surface of the ocean. Big surface discs, covered with buggies—it wanted him to know that, to see the discs, the water discs.

The buggies would live on the water, not on the land. Only the water—they wanted his permission. They wanted to use the water. That was what it was trying to tell him—that they wanted to use the surface of the water between the continents. Now the buggie was asking, imploring. It wanted to know. It wanted him to say, to answer, to give his permission. It was waiting to hear, waiting and hoping—imploring . . .

The scenes faded, winking out of his mind. Jimmy stumbled back, falling against the curb. He leaped up again, wiping damp grass from his hands. He was standing in the gutter. He could still see the buggie resting among the branches of the evergeen. It was almost invisible. He could scarcely make it out.

The drumming had receded, left his mind. The buggie had withdrawn.

Jimmy turned and fled. He ran across the street and down the other

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side, sobbing for breath. He came to the corner and turned up Douglas Street. At the bus-stop stood a heavy-set man with a lunchbucket under his arm.

Jimmy ran up to the man. "A buggie. In the tree." He gasped for breath. "In the big tree."

The man grunted. "Run along, kid."

"A buggie!" Jimmy's voice rose in panic, shrill and insistent. "A buggie up in the tree!"

Two men loomed up out of the darkness. "What? A buggie?"

"Where?"

More people appeared. "Where is it?"

Jimmy pointed, gesturing. "Pomeroy Estate. The tree. By the fence." He waved, gasping.

A cop appeared. "What's going on?"

"The kid's found a buggie. Somebody get a pole."

"Show me where it is," the cop said, grabbing hold of Jimmy's arm. "Come on."

Jimmy led them back down the street, to the brick wall. He hung back, away from the fence. "Up there."

"Which tree?"

"That one—I think."

A flashlight flicked on, picking its way among the evergreens. In the Pomeroy house lights came on. The front door opened.

"What's going on there?" Mr. Pomeroy's voice echoed angrily.

"Got a buggie. Keep back."

Mr. Pomeroy's doors slammed quickly shut.

"*There* it is!" Jimmy pointed up. "*That* tree." His heart almost stopped beating. "There. Up *there!*"

"Where?"

"I see it." The cop moved back, his pistol out.

"You can't shoot it. Bullets go right through."

"Somebody get a pole."

"Too high for a pole."

"Get a torch."

"Somebody bring a torch!"

Two men ran off. Cars were stopping. A police car slid to a halt, its siren whirring into silence. Doors opened, men came running over. A searchlight flashed on, dazzling them. It found the buggies and locked into place.

The buggie rested unmoving, hugging the branch of the evergreen. In the blinding light it looked like some giant cocoon clinging uncertainly to its place. The buggie began to move hesitantly, creeping around the trunk. Its wisps reached out, feeling for support.

"A torch, damn it! Get a torch here!"

A man came with a blazing board ripped from a fence. They poured gasoline over newspapers heaped in a ring around the base of the tree. The bottom branches began to burn, feebly at first, then more brightly.

"Get more gas!"

A man in white uniform came lugging a tank of gasoline. He

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threw the tankful of gas onto the tree. Flames blazed up, rising rapidly. The branches charred and crackled, burning furiously.

Far above them the buggie began to stir. It climbed uncertainly to a higher branch, pulling itself up. The flames licked closer. The buggie increased its pace. It undulated, dragging itself onto the next branch above. Higher and higher it climbed.

"Look at it go."

"It won't get away. It's almost at the top."

More gasoline was brought. The flames leaped higher. A crowd had collected around the fence. The police kept them back.

"There it goes." The light moved to keep the buggie visible.

"It's at the top."

The buggie had reached the top of the tree. It rested, holding onto the branch, swaying back and forth. Flames leaped from branch to branch, closer and closer to it. The buggie felt hesitantly around, blindly, seeking support. It reached, feeling with its wisps. A spurt of fire touched it.

The buggie crackled, smoke rising from it.

"It's burning!" An excited murmur swept through the crowd. "It's finished."

The buggie was on fire. It moved clumsily, trying to get away. Suddenly it dropped, falling to the branch below. For a second it hung on the branch, crackling and smoking. Then the branch gave way with a rending crackle.

The buggie fell to the ground, among the newspapers and gasoline.

The crowd roared. They seethed toward the tree, flowing and milling forward.

"*Step* on it!"

"*Get* it!"

"*Step* on the damn thing!"

Boots stamped again and again, feet rising and falling, grinding the buggie into the ground. A man fell, pulling himself away, his glasses hanging from one ear. Knots of struggling people fought with each other, pressing inward, trying to reach the tree. A flaming branch fell. Some of the crowd retreated.

"I *got* it!"

"Get *back!*"

More branches fell, crashing down. The crowd broke up, streaming back, laughing and pushing.

Jimmy felt the cop's hand on his arm, big fingers digging in. "That's the end, boy. It's all over."

"They get it?"

"They sure did. What's your name?"

"My name?" Jimmy started to tell the cop his name but just then some scuffling broke out between two men and the cop hurried over.

Jimmy stood for a moment, watching. The night was cold. A frigid wind blew around him, chilling him through his clothing. He thought suddenly of dinner and his father stretched out on the couch, reading the newspaper. His mother in the kitchen fixing dinner. The warmth, the friendly yellow homely warmth.

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He turned and made his way through the people to the edge of the street. Behind him the charred stalk of the tree rose black and smoking into the night. A few glowing remains were being stamped out around its base. The buggie was gone, it was over, there was nothing more to see.

Jimmy hurried home as if the buggie were chasing him.

"What do you say to that?" Ted Barnes demanded, sitting with his legs crossed, his chair back from the table. The cafeteria was full of noise and the smell of food. People pushed their trays along on the racks in front of them, gathering dishes from the dispensers.

"Your kid really did that?" Bob Walters said, across from him, with open curiosity.

"You sure you're not stringing us along?" Frank Hendricks said, lowering his newspaper for a moment.

"It's the truth. The one they got over at the Pomeroy Estate—I'm talking about that one. It was a real son-of-a-gun."

"That's right," Jack Green admitted. "The paper says some kid spotted it first and brought the police."

"That was my kid," Ted said, his chest swelling. "What do you guys think about that?"

"Was he scared?" Bob Walters wanted to know.

"Hell no!" Ted Barnes replied strongly.

"I'll bet he was," Frank Hendricks was from Missouri.

"He sure wasn't. He got the cops and brought them to the place—last night. We were sitting around the dinner table, wondering where the hell he was. I was getting a little worried." Ted Barnes was still the proud parent.

Jack Green got to his feet, looking at his watch. "Time to get back to the office."

Frank and Bob got up also. "See you later, Ted."

Green thumped Ted on the back. "Some kid you got, Barnes—chip off the old block."

Ted grinned. "He wasn't a bit afraid." He watched them go out of the cafeteria onto the busy noonday street. After a moment he gulped down the rest of his coffee and wiped his chin, standing slowly up. "Not a damn bit afraid—not one damn bit."

He paid for his lunch and pushed his way outside onto the street, his chest still swelled up. He grinned at people passing by as he walked back to the office, all aglow with reflected glory.

"Not a bit afraid," he murmured, full of pride, a deep glowing pride. "Not one damn bit!"

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the minister had to wait

by . . . Roger Dee

The Brass said, "Turn it on!" So Doc Maxey could but obey—which created one hell of a big mess.

Doc Maxey didn't build the Di-tube as a weapon. Furthermore, he swore, he would be damned if he'd stand by and see it turned into one.

Dora and I—Dora is Doc's daughter and I'm Jerry Bivins, his assistant—were helping him with the working model of the Di-tube generator in his Connecticut laboratory when he made that plain to the brass and brains of Allied Military, a delegation headed by two full generals and guarded by a hard-jawed squad of MP's.

But for once the Doc was on the wrong end of a browbeating. The generals knew their ground and they shut the Doc up like a thirty-dollar shoe clerk.

"Since a state of global emergency has been declared," Three-star Corbin said icily, "the military has full authority to commandeer the fruits of any independent research. Eastern and Western forces are at the ultimate in cold-war deadlock, a stalemate which must soon cripple the economy of the world unless it is broken. Your Dimension-tube offers an ideal weapon for ending it."

He was right about the deadlock if not about the Di-tube. Every strategically important center in the Eastern Hemisphere had been impregnably roofed since the early 1970's with the transmuscreen, a

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force-shield that inerted atomic warheads to harmless isotopic lead. We Westerners had the same protection, of course, which brought on the stalemate. The catch was that neither side could afford to relax its screens for an instant, and the power required to sustain those giant force-shells was rapidly exhausting the resources of both hemispheres.

Two-star Demarest was more diplomatic than Corbin but twice as pompous.

"As we understand it, Dr. Maxey, this Dimension-tunnel effect of yours will permit us to dispatch robojet warheads through an—ah, a cylindrical rift in the continuum of space to any desired part of the globe. A rift large enough would enable us to reach through the enemy's defense screens, short-cutting normal space in much the same manner as a two-dimensional ant, which was crawling upon a flat sheet of paper—"

"Could reach the opposite side instantaneously by piercing the paper," Doc finished for him, fuzzing out his scrubby beard like a baited goat. "The two of you sound like sub-juvenile idiots, mouthing moronic oversimplifications lifted straight from the Sunday comic-tapes. You disgust me with the human species!"

With that he whipped off his bifocals and stalked out. Ten seconds later he stalked back, prodded by the business end of a neuroblast rifle in the hands of a cold-eyed MP.

"Refusal to aid your country at such a time," Three-star Corbin pointed out, "is a treasonable action, punishable by indefinite imprisonment."

Two-star Demarest gave him the other barrel. "Stubbornness will gain you nothing, Doctor. Have you considered that our serum-and-psycho corps can easily extract the necessary information from you?"

Hard-headed as he was, the Doc read the handwriting on the wall without even adjusting his bifocals.

"You may change your minds after seeing the Subspace Twisters," he said. "Activate the model, Gerald."

I flipped the switch on the three-foot bakelite cabinet that housed our little Di-tube generator. It sizzled for a moment with a sound like frying bacon and shot out a two-inch beam from the copper helix at the bottom—a beam as clearly outlined as a water pipe but which couldn't really be seen because there was nothing there.

Don't let that throw you. Just take my word for it—it was a two-inch cylinder of nothing at all, a clean-cut shaft of absolute vacancy.

Until you looked into the twin-prism eyepiece we had rigged up, that is. You couldn't sight directly down the tube itself because the generator's energy feedback raised a glowing force-bubble that hung above the cabinet like a basketball-sized neon bulb. That bubble repre-

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sented a spherical strain against superspace, so Doc said, in compensation for the forced passage of the Di-tube through the continuum of subspace. A demonstration of the first law of physics, to every action an equal and opposite reaction.

Three-star Corbin looked first, pulling his rank. One glimpse of the Twisters was enough—he jumped a foot and turned the color of a dead flounder.

"In God's name," he choked when he got his breath back, "what *are* they?"

"We don't know," I told him. "But I'll give you odds that they wouldn't be chummy if they ever got up here."

I knew how he felt. My first sight of the Twisters had given me nightmares for a week. I won't try to describe them because they never looked alike to any two people. Doc said that a description didn't matter because what we thought we saw were only multidimensional cross-sections anyway—but I wouldn't know about that. To me they looked like inside-out octopuses.

—"You see?" Doc snapped, bristling his beard triumphantly. "The cross-sections we see of these inhabitants of subspace give no clue whatever as to their true nature. Even you should realise that opening a larger rift into their domain would be an extremely dangerous undertaking."

"Allied Military," said Three-star Corbin, who had got some of his color back, "is quite capable of dealing with these brutes if necessary. Dr. Maxey, you will proceed with the construction of a full-scale Dimension-tunnel."

The doc made some sulphurous remarks that were lost in his beard.

"I'd rot in prison first," he growled finally, "but for the fact that it would be suicidal to trust such equipment in the hands of morons. A larger generator could extend a Dimension-rift clean to infinity and sooner or later some incompetent fool would swing the beam in operation and slice the universe in half!"

And that was how the brass and brains of Allied Military got their big Di-tube generator built. It took three weeks, with Doc superintending and Dora and me doing the work, to set it up and tune it for the test.

Doc, being a hard loser, made one last-ditch attempt to argue them out of using the Di-tube.

"The mathematical concepts involved in this operation," he told the generals and their white-smocked technical staff, "are obviously beyond the grasp of your stunted intellects. Therefore I shall make shift with your adolescent analogy of the two-dimensional ant, which improbable brute in boring through his sheet of paper would find himself *for the duration of his passage* in a plane totally alien and untranslatable to terms of his own experience.

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"Like the ant we are dealing with a wholly new concept—subspace. My calculations show that other dimensions—there is no way of determining how many—lie above and below our own. In short-cutting either adjoining dimension we shall be as utterly out of our accustomed element as the ant in the paper. Moreover the continuum we call subspace is inhabited. Surely even you can see the danger involved?"

He was right, of course, but it didn't buy him anything. Nobody ever convinced a full general with that kind of argument.

"Proceed with the test," ordered Three-star Corbin.

There was nothing else for it. Dora clung to my arm, pressing close enough to make me almost glad of the risk we ran, while Doc obeyed orders.

Doc, muttering minor blasphemies into his beard, punched the button that activated the big generator—and loosed catastrophe, as the telepapers later said, on an unsuspecting world.

The big Di-tube machine didn't sizzle like the model—it roared. The glowing strain-bubble over the generator built up slowly to a humming orange sphere ten feet across. The cylindrical shaft of nothingness that speared out of the under side helix punched a hole like a mine shaft in the laboratory floor, a vertical tunnel of absolute vacancy that twisted the eyes half out of our heads with its brain-wrenching alienness.

The Twisters were out in force, swarming around in the big beam and looking more than ever like inside-out octopuses. They didn't have any eyes, as far as I could see, but I could feel them staring upward, studying us.

"*Now* will you listen to reason?" Doc demanded, and reached for the switch. "I'm going to turn off the beam, before—"

Catastrophe stopped him.

The big orange strain-bubble over the Di-tube generator exploded like an A-bomb. Concussion rocked the room, shattering windows and piling brasshats and technicians together in aimless heaps. Dora and I landed together in a corner, knocking over the little cabinet that housed our first model Di-tube generator.

The big generator overloaded, pouring out black smoke. Relays slammed like triphammers, shutting off current. The Di-tube shaft in the floor blinked out, taking the Twisters with it.

But another Dimension-tunnel speared downward through the roof, ending at the spot where the exploded strain-bubble had been. *And it wasn't ours.*

It was packed solid with what looked like bedsprings, coiled and conical, eight feet long and blazing with a crackling bluish light that hurt the eyes. They slid down the beam and popped out into the lab with a swift precision that meant they knew exactly what they were doing, to cluster like sizzling blue

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glow-worms about the smoking generator.

Half-dazed as I was, the truth hit me with a shock that curled my hair like an Angora rug. Those sputtering fire-worms were not ganging around the dead generator just to get warm.

They were *studying* it.

I got up somehow and headed for the laboratory exit, carrying Dora's limp form in my arms. The military beat me to it. The generals and their staffs were already there, jamming the doorway like a herd of stampeded sheep. I was the last man out, leaving the fire-worms still circling about the smoking generator.

Doc Maxey had stopped on the graveled gyro court halfway between the lab and his house on the hill above but he wasn't waiting for us. He was staring back toward the lab with his scrubby beard fluttering in the night wind and his eyes shining like wet marbles.

I looked back to see smoke pouring out of the laboratory windows. Great sparks of light shot out through it but it wasn't until I understood Doc's yammering that I knew what they were.

"They've left the rift!" he was yelling. "They're free—we've let those monsters loose on the world!"

The fire-worms scattered systematically, taking off in every direction like snaky skyrockets. One minute the air was full of them—the next they were gone.

"This new Di-tube came through when our strain-bubble burst," I said, looking up at the shaft of vacancy dwindling away into the sky. Dora came out of her faint then but I didn't put her down—I liked holding her too well. "But how, Doc, and from where?"

"From superspace, the plane of existence immediately above ours," Doc said, wringing his hands. "The energy backlash from our generator must have weakened the spatial barrier between dimensions, enabling them to break through at the point of stress."

Even I could understand that. Dora got it too and hid her face against my chest. "We've got to stop them somehow," she said. "Jerry don't just stand here—*do* something!"

At another time it would have been funny—she was asking *me* to stop this catastrophe when the best brains in the Western Hemisphere were legging it up the hill with nothing on their minds but mileage.

"This is no time for jokes," I told her. "Let's get up to the house and call Washington, Doc."

There were two phones in the house but we couldn't get within yelling distance of either of them. Both generals were on the wire, countermanding each other's orders right and left and screaming for the Air Marines. The living-room t-v was blaring full blast at a circle of both Eastern and Westenr hemispheres and they were hitting us right where we lived.

In the space of a few minutes

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those speeding fire-worms had spread over the entire globe. They had penetrated the defense screens of both Eastern and Western hemispheres and they were hitting us right where we lived.

"The invaders do not seem to be conscious of us as entities," the newscaster gabbled. "But they are attracted to concentrations of nuclear materials as flies are drawn to honey and for the same reason. Every atomic pile on Earth has been besieged by these alien monsters, who are draining away our nuclear energy like leeches. At the present rate all smaller piles will soon be inerted and larger ones—wait, a special bulletin. . . .

"Latest information sheds some light upon the sudden onslaught of the Blazers, as the invaders are being called by a public still largely unaware of its danger. They first appeared some twenty minutes ago during a top-secret military experiment at the Connecticut laboratory of Dr. Marvin Maxey, well-known scientific—"

Somebody shut off the set and we stared at each other in blank silence. Nobody even tried to pass the buck—fixing the blame wasn't important now. All that mattered was that unless the Blazers were stopped immediately our world was finished. Those fission-hungry fiends would strip us to the last erg of our nuclear energy—and to a world geared to atomic power that meant the end.

We had forgotten the coming war completely. There was no point in worrying now about being blasted out of our beds. In a few days most of us would be starving to death in them.

The brasshats camped on the telephones until daylight before they gave it up. Dora was dishing up scrambled eggs and coffee to Doc and me in the kitchen when Three-star Corbin stumbled in, out on his feet.

"You were right, Dr. Maxey," he groaned. "Using your Dimension-tube as a weapon was a mistake, a cosmic and irremediable error. These invaders are indestructible—the concerted might of Allied Military has failed to repel them. The doom of Earth is sealed."

Doc plucked unhappily at his beard.

"Surely we can retool our industries to electric power in time," he said. But he didn't sound sure. He sounded beaten.

Corbin shook his head grayly. "You don't understand the psychology of panic, Doctor. Law is dependent upon power. When power fails the mob rules. By this time tomorrow government will have begun to break down. Civilization as we know it will disintegrate within a matter of days."

I had known that all along, of course, but all of a sudden the real enormity of what was happening hit me like a boot in the stomach. There sat Doc Maxey, one of the most brilliant physicists in the world—stumped. Beside him

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drooped Three-star General Corbin, high commander of Allied Military, and he was as helpless as a corner newsboy. A top-flight crew of research technicians stood around in the living room like so many cigar-store dummies, looking at each other blankly while the world skidded to ruin on a slippery cosmic banana peel.

Dora came over and put an arm across my shoulders. As suddenly as I had got scared I got mad.

It wasn't just the idea of the world going bust that burned me. This was a personal business that threatened Dora and me and our friends and all the millions and millions of people we had never even seen. Here was the lot of us headed A-over-T straight back to the stone ages. A few days more and people we had known and loved would be hunting each other through the streets with clubs, driven to murder and worse because a crew of greedy alien fire-worms had a taste for atomic fission.

It was a hopeless affair and I knew it. But down inside me a nagging little ghost of an idea kept whispering that we must have overlooked *something*, that somewhere there must be a loophole these high-voltage intellects had missed. Sometimes, I told myself, theorists can be as dumb as ordinary people. Sometimes they just can't see the trees for the woods.

"Look," I said. "We're missing a bet somewhere. We built the Di-tube in the beginning to . . ."

Doc gave me a pitying look. "Will you keep your infantile inspirations to yourself, Gerald? I'm trying to think."

I turned to Three-star Corbin, getting eager because the idea had just nudged me again. It wasn't clear yet—but it was there, begging to be recognized like a half-remembered name that trembles on the tip of your tongue.

"Will you listen, General? There's a chance that . . ."

The general gave me a poisonous glare. "Can't you see that I'm planning a course of action? Shut up or I'll have you thrown out!"

I jumped up, knocking over my coffee, and walked out. Dora came outside after me and caught my arm. "Jerry! What are you going to do?"

"I'm going down to the lab," I said. "Maybe I'm nuts but I think we've still got a chance to beat this infernal thing."

The sun came up round and rosy while we walked down to the lab and I felt my scalp prickle when I saw the no-colored shaft of the Blazers' Di-tube rising against it like a black finger of doom.

"There used to be an early mail rocket out of Waterbury at sunrise," Dora said softly, "and a passenger flight just afterward. Remember how we used to complain because they woke us up, Jerry? And now—"

"Now there won't be any more rockets," I said. "There won't be any more movie dates or drive-ins

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or corny floor shows, no more football games or Sunday afternoon spins in the country. There won't be any more people after awhile, except a scattering of gee-strung savages running wild in packs and maybe eating each other. Go back and look after Doc, will you? He needs you."

But she wouldn't go.

The original Di-tube model was still in its corner, undamaged. I had done a solid job of wiring and testing that rig and it had stood the blast without even so much as a bent helix.

I checked it over, working fast, and bolted on a power feed rectifier that would adapt it to a mobile a.c. input. The little cabinet was too heavy to lift, so I edged it onto a hand-truck and trundled it out of the lab and across the graveled landing court to the shed where Doc's gyro stood.

Dora helped me hoist it inside and bolt it down. Ten minutes later, when it was all set to go, I tried again to talk her into going back. There wasn't more than a chance in ten thousand that my idea would work and if it did I'd be left stranded in an alien dimension. And besides that . . .

I should have saved my breath. "I don't know what you're planning," Dora said, squeezing into the seat beside me. "But it doesn't matter. I'm going with you, Jerry."

I looked out at the Blazers' Di-tube, standing black against the sunrise, and I didn't argue. Maybe she was right. Why not go now, together, and get it over with?

"All right," I said, and sent the gyro whirring out of the shed. "Hang on tight, Kid—here goes nothing!"

The MP's poured out of the house just as we took the air. I could see them yelling and waving their neuroblast guns but there was no point in waiting. They wouldn't have listened anyway.

The lab slid under us and we shot straight for the big Di-tube looming up ahead. Breaking into it made me feel the way the Twisters looked —inside out, upside down, impossibly extended and at the same time compressed to microscopic smallness in a vast hueless infinity that lasted for I don't know how long.

It turned out that there really was no such thing as time—or distance either for that matter—between dimensions. The Di-tube itself was a sort of sensory compromise, an illusion created by the mind's effort to visualize a cross-section of a continuum that can't be visualized.

Our transit made me think of the two-dimensional ant. One instant we were over the lab—the next we were out of this world, in superspace.

The Blazers' dimension was worse than the Di-tube.

Looking through the gyro's window made me feel like a schizophrenic drunkard with a set of mirror-image screamies, watching impossibly elastic nightmare

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shadows flickering across a crazy-house looking-glass. There was an upside-down horizon that heaved like a bowl of phosphorescent jelly, a scattering of what might have been animated buildings and, close at hand, a great flurry of helical Blazers, circling like mad about something I *did* recognize.

It was a huge orange strain-bubble, a space-warp set up by whatever sort of generator that Blazers had made to pierce our dimension.

There wasn't a chance of making any real sense of what I saw. It would have been easier for a flea on a camel's back to describe what went on in a three-ring circus.

But the strain-bubble was what I had come to see. The rest didn't matter too much.

"Warm up the model," I said. My voice had a thin, windy sound and I couldn't keep it steady. "From the way they're flitting around that bubble they've got troubles of their own—and they're going to have more!"

Dora understood then what I had in mind. "Their generator is weakening the barrier to the dimension above this one!" she said. "Jerry, something is trying to break through, isn't it?"

Our little Di-tube model gave a tentative sizzle, and it sounded pitifully weak. Using it was like tackling a grizzly with a hatpin—but there was no help for that now.

"They aren't zipping around that space-blister for exercise," I said. "Maybe they don't know exactly what is on the other side, but they're worried."

That was the whole crazy million-to-one chance that had brought me there. It stood to reason that the Blazers' Di-tube generator would create a strain-warp similar to ours in their own dimension. If we could puncture their weak spot as they had punctured ours . . .

The two-inch beam of our little Di-tube shot out, boring wide of the outlandish blob that was the Blazers' generator. I swung it back, correcting my aim, and the heat went on.

The Blazers dropped their work instantly and whirled up toward us. But for once they were slow—our little Di-shaft sliced through and beyond them. And touched the strain-bubble.

There was a searing flash and a soundless jarring concussion, and the thing went up in a blinding shower of orange sparks.

It was over as quickly as that. The Blazers swarming toward us whipped back to man the breach we had made and they had unexpected reenforcements—they must have alerted their party on Earth already because the wavering Di-tube was suddenly crowded with returning fire-worms, zipping back home to superspace.

I swung our gyro toward the fading Di-shaft, gave it full throttle and prayed. Dora was gripping my arm and crying something in my

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ear but I didn't understand a word of it.

I looked back once, just before we hit the crumbling column. The shower of sparks had died out, and in its place stood a familiar shaft of vacancy, boring outward into the upside-down sky. Something squeezed through the break while I watched, beating back the Blazers who fought to stop it.

I got only a glimpse but I'll never be the same again.

It was a Twister but it didn't look like the ones we had seen through our Di-tube. What we had seen then were only reversed projections, Doc Maxey said later, transposed cross-sections altered to something we could partially visualize with our limited senses.

But this Twister wasn't transposed and it didn't look like an inside-out octopus. It writhed and swelled and radiated a dark devouring *coldness* that snuffed out Blazers like sparks against an ice cake.

Other Twisters may have followed it—I wouldn't know. We hit the Di-tube then and at the same moment the Blazers' generator blew up with an appalling blast . . .

The next instant we were sailing over a parched and blazing desert, a glaring waste of jagged lava that stretched away on every side through a shimmering haze of heat. Black basalt cliffs jutted up here and there, warped and eroded by scorching winds.

Dora and I looked at each other dumbly.

"We got away," Dora said. "But what sort of dimension is *this?* Where are we, Jerry?"

It was a good question. Judging from the landscape the collapsing Di-tube could have shunted us straight into the ash-bin of hell. There wasn't a twinkle of water anywhere, not a wisp of cloud nor a flutter of bird in the sky. Just a vast wind-swept desolation, parching to a sandy crisp under a flaming sun.

I was fumbling for an answer when Dora caught my arm. "Look, Jerry—there, over the horizon. Isn't that smoke?"

I looked and it was—a thin white streamer of smoke rising across the badlands, wavering at the top like the crooking of an enigmatic finger.

"We may as well investigate," I said, heeling the gyro toward it. "If it means another danger we might as well face it now as later."

But it wasn't another alien menace.

It was a sheep camp at the edge of the lava beds not far from San Rafael, New Mexico. The Mexican herder ran like a jackrabbit when we swooped down, never having seen a gyro before, but at Acomita —over on the Pueblo Indian reservation—we found a government agent who gave us our bearings and brought us up to date.

After what we had been through, it was only a minor shock to learn that it wasn't 1982 any longer. It

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was 1985 and the Blazers had been gone for so long that they were practically forgotten. Doc Maxey explained later, when we showed up with a small army of telepaper reporters at his Connecticut home, that our being caught in the collapsing Di-field had somehow distorted the time values involved and had shunted us three years into the future.

We took his word for it.

"The proponents of the circular-universe theory were more right than they knew," Doc said, beaming and waggling his beard. "There would seem to be only three major planes of existence, each existing in a state of reciprocal contiguity to the other two.

"I suspect also that spherical space is actually a unilateral continuum of three layers, restricting lateral transit to one direction in much the same fashion as a rectifying crystal governs the flow of electrons. That would explain why the Twisters could force entrance to the Blazers' dimension, once you destroyed the strain-bubble in superspace, but could not enter our plane from their own subspatial continuum."

"It's all physics to me," I said, holding Dora's hand and feeling almost safe again. "Only one thing worries me—did the Blazers lose the rhubarb we ran out on or will we have them back in our hair again some day?"

Doc gave me a startled squint and fuzzed his beard goatishly. "Get that model generator out of the gyro," he ordered, sounding like his old self. "We'll never know what the situation really is unless we reactivate the Di-tube and—"

"And start that ratrace again?" I yelled. I could see the whole crazy business happening over and over in a sort of vicious cosmic circle, and the thought made my scalp crawl. "Over my dead body you will!"

Dora and I had planned to find a minister next but the big moment had to wait. I had one final adjustment to make on that infernal Di-tube model first.

I made it on the spot—with a large sledgehammer.

Dr. Einstein has received a multitude of well-deserved honors but as far as we know science fiction has yet to do him direct homage. And surely he rates it—for had he not, some sixty years ago, come up with his full-born theory of the fourth dimension (and won worldwide publicity for said dimension) STF would have been deprived of one of its basic staples. Without the fourth (and fifth, sixth, seventh and so on) dimension, authors of speculative fantasy would have been left stumbling amid the distorted metaphysics of their Gothic forerunners—and would thereby have been constantly at war with the clergy. Thanks to Dr. Einstein they can roam the dimensions at will, threatened by no purgatory except that of creative writing itself or of the possibility of a repection slip.

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finders keepers

by . . . Milton Lesser

Amhurst wanted to get married. But then an invisible ingenue moved in on his wedding day . . .

EDDIE AMHURST WATCHED the scissors get up from the dresser and march across the room. If they had marched on the floor it would have been bad enough—but not this bad. They marched across the air of the bedroom, one thin metal leg after the other, to where Eddie was sitting on the edge of the bed in his underwear.

They went *snip, snip*—once, twice, rapidly. Then they marched again across the air of the room and plunked down on the dresser.

In his right hand Eddie held a silky piece of black cloth. In his left hand he held a similar item. On the floor at his feet were two other pieces of black cloth. If you glued the sections together you'd have a pair of black silk socks, size twelve. They were so new that you could still see where the paper telling the brand-name and the size clung to one of them.

But they weren't much good as socks anymore. In his hands Eddie held what could have been a pair of black-silk spats except that no one wore black-silk spats. On the floor at his feet were two black silk *fingerless* gloves.

"Hey, George!" Eddie called. "George, come here quick."

George ran in from the bathroom, shaving-soap still on one side

A TIME-TRAVEL TALE THAT TAKES TIME-OUT FOR LAUGHTER.

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of his face. He looked at Eddie and the two pieces of black silk in Eddie's hands. He said, "What the hell did you do that for?"

"Me? I didn't do anything."

"Anyone can see that you went to the dresser, got the scissors, cut your socks in half, then put the scissors back on the dresser. What I want to know is why. *Why?*"

"I didn't," Eddie said lamely. Then he told George how the scissors had got up, marched across the room, and cut his socks.

"Yeah," said George. "Right away. Take it easy, kid. I know you're about to be married. I know you're nervous. But relax. Just take it easy—calm down."

"Hah!" said Eddie. *"Hah!"*

"What's so funny?"

"I can prove to you that I didn't get up, take the scissors and cut my socks. I can prove it, that's what."

George told him to go ahead.

"I just took a shower, right?"

"Right."

"I always powder my feet after a shower, right?"

"Howinhell should I know?"

Eddie sat back on the bed and stuck his feet out. "Look."

There was white powder all over the bottoms of his feet, a lot more of it in between his toes.

"Okay," George said. "I see it. What does that prove?"

"You go ahead and find the powder on the rug. If I walked from here to the dresser and back there'd be powder all over the rug where I walked. Find it."

George looked but the rug was solid blue without any white marks on it. "So you crawled on your hands and knees, so you walked on your hands. Just don't tell me the scissors did that themselves. They couldn't."

"I didn't say they did it by themselves. *Something made them do it.* Something doesn't want me to get married, George. Take last night. Someone put pineapple in my fruit cup. You know I'm allergic to pineapple. It makes me itch all over for two days but luckily I found it. When I came back from the florist the bridge was out. I could have been killed if I hadn't noticed it."

George shook his head. "The bridge was *not* out. I went back and looked for myself later. You went the long way for nothing because the bridge is standing as it always stood. Did you hear anything over the radio about the bridge being out?"

"No-o-o . . ."

"There wasn't even any rain. Eddie-boy, you're just nervous. You're imagining things. Judy will have a nervous wreck on her hands if you keep this up. Look—you just sit here and wait for me while I run downtown and get you another pair of black socks."

"Uh-unh. It's Sunday and the stores are closed."

"Okay, I'll let you wear mine. I'm only the best man and I'll wear navy blue and no one will know the

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difference." George sat on the edge of the bed next to Eddie and took off his shoes and socks. He gave the socks—just a half-size too big—to Eddie, then padded across the room to the chest of drawers to find a pair of navy socks for himself.

The scissors got up off the dresser again while George's back was turned and Eddie wanted to yell, only no sound came out. He just sat there watching while the scissors cut this new pair of black socks neatly in half. Then George began to turn around and the scissors dropped quickly at Eddie's feet.

George held up a pair of navy socks. "I got 'em . . ." he began. "Eddie, what the hell did you do *that* again for?"

"Honest . . ."

"Never mind. We'll both wear navy." Plainly he thought his cousin Judy was marrying a lunatic.

The thing that surprised Eddie most was the fact nothing happened during the first part of the ceremony. It was an outdoor wedding and he stood with George at the makeshift altar in the garden while Judy came down the aisle with her entourage.

Judy was lovely in her getup, all right, only Eddie could have done without all the pomp and ceremony. And lately there had been something about Judy—little meannesses, some annoying petulances—which had left Eddie on the irritable side.

It was her mother as much as anything, a fat overbearing dominating windbag . . . Eddie boy, stop talking to yourself that way about your future mother-in-law . . .

Why should you? Go ahead, keep thinking like that if it's what you feel. Assert yourself.

"Who said that?"

"Said what?" George wanted to know. "I didn't hear anyone. And be quiet, Eddie—people are looking at you."

You don't have to be quiet unless you really want to. Don't let them rope you into anything, Eddie—it still isn't too late.

Eddie looked in vain for the source of the voice but everyone around him seemed so utterly unperturbed that he could only conclude that he was hearing things. Could this have been the voice of his conscience, telling him to get out while the getting was good?

Conscience, smonscience. No such thing, Eddie. It's me.

"Well, who are *you*?"

George said, "*Will* you shut up, Eddie? Everyone's staring."

After that it wasn't easy. Judy joined him at the altar but he listened to the ceremony with only one ear. With the other he tried to pay attention to the voice which he alone heard. Since it continued and since he was the only one who heard it, he concluded quite logically that he was going off his rocker. Then maybe he *was* being roped into something—because if the prospect of marriage to Judy made him feel

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this way, then maybe he'd better call the whole thing off before it was too late.

Or had the strange voice put that idea into his head? Come to think of it, here was a nice pleasant female voice. It didn't rasp like Mrs. Wilkins' voice and it didn't hold the slight suggestion of a whine dormant in her daughter Judy's.

"Do you, Edward, take this girl Judy, to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Silence, except for a few sobs and whimpers in the sea of faces around them.

"Do you, Edward . . ."

Don't do it, Eddie. Do it and that'll be the end for you. You'd regret it something awful.

"You think so, Miss, ah—"

I'll tell you my name after you refuse. You'll find out a lot of things after.

George wailed in Eddie's ear, "For gosh sakes, boy—you're holding up the works! And quit that mumbling to yourself. Just say yes."

"*Hmmm,*" said Eddie, cogitating.

". . . And do you, Judy, take this man Edward—"

Apparently his *hmmm* had been taken as an affirmative if nervous response.

You're right, Eddie—that's just what happened. Only don't let them go on. In a moment it will be too late, and you'll be stuck.

"You think so, eh?"

"Shut *up!*" George hissed in his ear.

". . . To have and to hold through sickness and in health, till—"

The wind came up so suddenly, and with it the clouds, that one moment they stood in a bright sunshiny garden, the next it was dark and somber and overhead lightning flashed and thunder rolled sullenly.

The rain came down in thick sheets from what had been a moment before a wonderfully clear blue sky. Even George's composure received a serious dent. "It just can't happen that fast!" he cried.

Judy sobbed, "My gown. Oh, my precious gown!"

"I said, do you, Judy . . ."

Don't let him go on, Eddie. The rain will add to the confusion. Tell him you never said yes—you never did, you know.

"That's true. I didn't."

"Didn't what?" George demanded as several men ran out to them with umbrellas.

"I never said yes," Eddie told him, but the thunder all but drowned him out. "I never said yes!" he fairly screamed.

Since everyone had heard him that time, the ceremony had to begin anew. "Do you, Edward . . ."

Better, better that you don't, Eddie.

"Will you *please* be quiet and let me make up my own mind?"

"Eddie!" This was George.

". . . to have and to hold, through . . ."

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Judy was trying vainly to pull the entire length of her gown under the umbrella and the fact that she couldn't made her pout. Her makeup was running in the rain too—and quite suddenly she looked rather unpretty. Definitely positively irrevocably unpretty—a younger thinner somewhat more attractive image of her mother. A thoroughly revolting thought.

"Uh-unh," said Eddie.

You tell 'em, Eddie-boy.

"Uh-unh."

George whispered, "What does that mean? Say yes so everyone can hear you, especially with this thunder."

"That doesn't mean yes," Eddie explained patiently. But then, because the thunder roared still louder, he shouted, "In fact, it means the opposite of yes."

You tell 'em, Eddie.

"It means that this is all a mistake. I will not marry Judy. The answer to the question is no, *no,* NO!"

No one did anything. They all just stood there, looking at him, and Judy even forgot to see how the rain was ruining her gown. Eddie became embarassed—they all just stared. Presently he kissed Judy's cheek politely, said he was sorry, turned on his heel and strode down the muddy aisle.

Everyone looked but no one tried to stop him.

The voice said, *You told 'em, Eddie. You sure told 'em!*

He took a hot shower and it made him feel much better. When he finished and got into a pair of dungarees and a tee-shirt and lit a cigarette, the bell rang. It was George.

"I ought to punch your nose, Eddie Amhurst."

Don't let him talk that way, Eddie. Until now the voice had been silent since the ruined ceremony.

"Don't talk to me that way. Just because she was your cousin and just because you introduced us on a blind date—"

Splat! Something hit Eddie's nose, just as had been predicted and he sat down on the floor.

He hit you! Get up and knock the stuffing out of him, Eddie.

Eddie's nose bled easily. It was bleeding now. He stood up and George hit him again and then his nose was bleeding more than ever.

This time Eddie sat there and did not try to get up. He knew there were about nine quarts of blood in his body and he must have lost at least a quart by now.

George readjusted his high hat. He took a step towards the door but never reached it. A big redwood bookend took off from an end-table and thudded against the side of his head. His high hat fell off and he sat down next to Eddie, muttering something about hitting him from behind.

The voice said, *I couldn't bear to let you take a beating. If you can't defend yourself, then I've got to do it for you.*

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For the first time a concrete thought on all this came to Eddie—perhaps it was a girl, just an ordinary girl, only she was invisible. He had seen a movie once and while the invisible man in it had remained invisible, if you put some clothing on him you could see his shape.

Eddie ran around the room with George's high hat, trying to find an invisible head. But after a time he felt silly. The hat kept falling to the floor every time he tried to put it on something.

The voice giggled. *You're wasting your time, Eddie. I'm not invisible, not in the way you mean. Now that you didn't marry that Judy-thing, you have no ties. Right?*

"Umm."

No parents?

"Nope."

No close relatives of any type?

"A bunch of third cousins in Chicago I think."

They don't matter. Any close friends?

Eddie looked down at the floor, where George was trying to get up. "I used to have one," he said.

But not now—not any longer. Good! Then you can come with me, Eddie. I had to make sure of that first. You ready?

"Where are we going?"

Just have some patience and you'll see for yourself.

"Maybe I won't like it."

"He's talking to himself again," George said. "Am I glad my cousin didn't marry *him!* Lucky Judy."

Ready, Eddie? Hah! A poet and don't know it!

"Umm."

Eddie began to feel dizzy but he reasoned that was because George had punched him in the nose not once but twice. Soon the floor came up to meet him because he no longer could keep his balance and then, as he sat there, everything began to grow hazy, foggy, unreal. Soon the room was only a shadow of a room and he could not even tell that the rug was blue. Less than a shadow, it seemed to dissolve in water—in very hot water, because it dissolved quickly.

This Eddie did not know—but he dissolved with it . . .

* * * * *

"Edam Hurst! Wake up!"

Eddie sat up groggily. He was on a big comfortable couch and the voice came out of a loudspeaker on the wall. There were the couch and the loudspeaker, a closed door and Eddie—and outside of that the room, a small one, was empty.

"You got it wrong," Eddie said. "Just a matter of pronouncing. Not Edam Hurst. Ed Amhurst. Get the difference?"

"Subtle," the voice said. "It doesn't matter. There isn't another Edam Hurst or Ed Amhurst here. No confusion."

"Well, where's the other voice? The woman."

"Early cultural trait," the voice mused. "High sex-identification. Eeb did nothing to assert her feminity, yet he knew the voice

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for a woman's. Interesting, extremely interesting."

"Of course she's a woman."

"The timbre isn't that much different for you to know it as a certainty ever. High sex-identification in your time, young man. If I simply heard Eeb's voice I'd never know her sex—not just from her voice."

"Well, she *is* a woman."

"Certainly, certainly—and a mighty troublesome one. First time something like this has happened in nearly a thousand years. What do you think we ought to do?"

"How the heck should I know? I don't even know what happened."

"True, true. I'd forgotten you're no telepath. I wonder if telepathy came in when high sex-identification began to wane. Umm, no—hardly possible. Eeb is obviously a throwback and she has both. Intriguing."

The door opened and a woman entered the room. She was dressed in shorts and some sort of negligible halter. She walked across the room to the loudspeaker and Eddie, who had, armed with tapemeasure, once judged a local beauty contest, was sure she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

She said, "I'd better shut that thing off before Rajuz lulls you to sleep with all his scientific talk." She flicked a switch on the loudspeaker. "Of course he can still speak through telepathy but your mind won't get the impulses without that loudspeaker, Eddie. See? I can hear him now but you can't."

Eddie had to take her word for it because he couldn't hear a thing. He hardly cared. Of paramount importance was this fact—here was *the* voice. Not any voice but the one that had brought him here, wherever *hers* was.

Eddie tried to be patient. "You're Eeb," he said. "That much I know. But where the hell are we?"

"You mean, in space?"

"Uh-huh."

"We're exactly where your room was. We haven't moved an inch."

"So where's my room? Where is it then?"

"It isn't. It *was*. Fifty thousand years ago it was, Eddie. Not now. Now it's gone, with the building, with the city, with your whole civilization. We've left your time and entered mine."

"Yeah," said Eddie. His voice sounded lame.

"You don't believe me."

"Nope, sorry—I don't." In truth Eddie was glad he hadn't married Judy but as for the rest of this, well—he was from Missouri.

"It's simple. I'm a professor of history and my period of study was yours, the second millenium of the Christian Era."

"Do you—ah—teach history in that outfit?" He pointed to the enticing lines of her halter and shorts.

"Certainly. It's comfortable. Anyway we use no guesswork in history. We use a time-scanner. That, of course, makes history the most accurate of all the sciences.

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It's mental travel through time—not physical unless you will it.

"Elementary stuff, Eddie. Just as they learned teleportation through space ten thousand years ago, so they learned you can do the same thing through time. Mental effort, applied properly, can move physical objects. It was always latent in human beings through some unknown ancestor—they just had to learn how to control the power."

Eddie was still skeptical. "So you studied history by actually going back there?"

"Something like that. Then I found you, Edam Hurst."

"Ed Amhurst."

"What's the difference? I found you and once I did, purely by chance, of course—that was the end of history. No more studying. They tell me I'm a throwback—less psi-quotient, more sex identification than anyone here. Maybe that explains it.

"Anyway I had to bring you back. People constantly teleport trophies through time—but not in a thousand years has anyone brought back a human being. I saw that you had no ties and I brought you. Unfortunately there's a law against it, I think."

Eddie asked her why.

"It can cause a lot of trouble. You can change history by bringing someone where he doesn't belong. But I had to. I'm a throwback. I couldn't be satisfied . . ."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, she had been walking closer and closer to Eddie, ever since she had turned off the loudspeaker. Now, abruptly, she was standing next to him—and then she was sitting on his lap. She snuggled in close and then she began to kiss him and Eddie knew at once that kissing had come a long way in fifty thousand years, even if the psi quotient was greater and sex identification had diminished.

Three minutes later Eeb got up and Eddie knew quite suddenly that while he had always known love at first sight to be ridiculous and impossible, love at first kiss was a very different matter.

"Damn that Rajuz! He's the Dean, and he wants us in his office. So it goes, Eddie—if it's not one thing it's another. We have no choice, of course. We'll have to go."

They left the room and stood on a moving sidewalk with a lot of other people and this first five-minute glimpse of the place was enough to convince him that he had indeed been teleported through time. A lot of what he saw could not even register in his brain simply because he had no standards for comparison. But he did notice almost at the outset that everything seemed simplified—possibly because telepathy and teleportation were the reigning king and queen.

"You've seen enough of the city for now," Eeb told him. "All these people are out walking for the exercise. Let's take the shorter way to Rajuz's office."

One moment they stood there on

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the moving sidewalk, the next they were in the presence of Rajuz.

Rajuz sat at what must have been a desk, a spherical desk, but he did not look much like a dean. He could have been a technician or even a truck-driver.

Eeb explained, "The trend has been away from differentiation since the sex-identification patterns were decreased. But I'm fed up with it. They all look the same, like that. You know something, Eddie? I like you better."

Rajuz tuned in another of the loudspeakers on his desk, and Eeb explained that it was necessary because the psi-quotient varied in everyone.

"Eeb Lym, Edam Hurst, you have committed a misdemeanor."

"Not him," Eeb said. "It was all my fault."

"Motivation is above suspicion here, you know that. It is the law —if someone does something it is because he wants to. Edam Hurst is as guilty as you are."

He scowled at them for a time and then continued. "Frankly, I don't know what to do. This is the first crime of this nature in a thousand years and while it's merely a misdemeanor it will have to go punished."

"Yes," Eeb agreed. "I guess so. You name it and we'll oblige."

"You won't like it."

"Name it anyway."

"The punishment simply is this —you are to take Edam Hurst back where he belongs."

"Oh, no! Not after I found him—"

"That is the punishment. Throwback or no you must learn that sex identification is decidedly secondary to psi quotient. When can you take him?"

"Well, I—"

"Don't I have anything to say about this?" Eddie demanded.

"A feeble bit at best. Just sit still and listen, young man."

"—I suppose I can take him this afternoon if the scanner room is vacant."

"It will be vacant, we'll see to that. I'm glad you're being sensible about this whole unhappy affair, Eeb Lym."

"What are you so cheerful about?" Eddie said.

They stood in the scanner room and the girl was humming a little tune. "Don't worry, Edam Hurst. Relax, Eddie. I'm cheerful because I know what I'm doing, that's why. Just bear with me."

He had no choice. But now that suddenly, devastatingly, he felt about Eeb the way she felt about him, he did not want to lose her. It was as simple as that.

"Time is huge," Eeb told him. "You didn't think that once I found you I'd let you go? Oh no, I found you and you're mine—that's all there is to it. Even Jeeva, Lord of the City, couldn't do a thing about it. Nossir. Time is big and while I said . . ."

She flicked a switch and kicked

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nonchalantly at a pedal with her foot. "That ought to do it. Just don't be frightened, Eddie. The important thing—"

"The important thing," he finished for her, "is that we want to be together, right?"

"Right," she said, kissed him soundly and turned a little knob on the wall. "*Now* we're ready."

As before Eddie became dizzy and soon he was sitting on the floor watching the room spin and fade, spin and fade.

By the time it dissolved, Eddie was whirling away into a giddy limbo . . .

He stood up and heard the wild nature sounds all around them. The bulk of the time-machine was big at his side in a green wooded glen. Eeb came dancing up to him with an armful of fruit. "Here, it's delicious. Taste it—"

She held out her hand and he took a bite, then looked up sharply. With a whirring sound, the machine faded, disappeared.

"I sent it back," the girl said. "I wanted to make it permanent, just you and I. Time is big and they'll never find us. Besides, they'll think this is punishment enough. We're exiled back here."

"Well, where is *here*?"

"Oh, I'm not exactly sure. Right around the time the human species emerged. Should be a wonderful life, Eddie—"

Eddie began to sing a popular song. Popular? It had been popular —when? This all was very confusing.

"Edam Hurst, you have positively the worst singing voice I've ever heard."

He smiled and told her to be quiet, kissing her to put more force behind the command. Then, hand in hand, Edam and Eeb walked through their glen.

The names of those congenital skeptics who insist that time-travel is impossible, even in theory, are Legion. Nor is their stand difficult to comprehend. They say that no man or woman has yet traveled backward to meet a younger him or herself face to face. They say this is immutable paradox. And by way of clincher they add a query as to why, if time-travel is to come, has it never happened? Why haven't we recorded instances of visitations from the future.

However, those in favor of time-travel have answers ready and waiting. These optimists (?) use the parallel universe theory to meet the first question. Such return, they claim, would immediately cause a forking of the Earthways, leaving our version of the world untrodden by time-traveling feet. As to the clincher, they counter-question with a How do we know we haven't had such visitors? Time-travel, when it comes, will come in a far-distant future. At such a distance the mere six thousand years of recorded human history is a mere fly-speck on the annals of Earth. So why should this tiny dot in the continuum have been favored?

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war in heaven

by . . . Fletcher Pratt

Who is going to use death-rays when solid-shot and space-mines will bring far cheaper victory? An article about space-warfare.

The mighty ship released a flashing sheet of energy but the Uranian space-vessel's beams were met by a counter-energy screen that caused its blinding heat to ricochet in flashing showers from a barrier invisible against the star-studded black wall of space . . .

OH, YEAH? IT READS WELL—or has a few thousand fictional times—but it doesn't make sense in a too-real future.

Look chum, a searing bolt of flame has to have something that will support combustion or it will go out. And what do you mean "sheet of energy?" How do you generate it? How do you expect to keep radiation in a tight beam across a couple of thousand miles of space when you can't even prevent a beam of light from spreading after a couple of thousand feet?

The tractor and repulsor beams, screens of force and death-rays of high-power interplanetary stories simply aren't going to work. At least not according to any science we know now. About the only kind of "ray" that might be dangerous would be ultra-violet.

Virtually all science fiction authors and most of those who read the stuff have speculated at one time or another upon space-warfare. How will it be waged? What will the ships be like, the weapons, the tactics? Fletcher Pratt, even more renowned as a military and naval historian and student than as a science fiction author here take a peek into an all-too probable future and comes up with some well-thought-out answers that are guaranteed to surprise all would-be spacemen.

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But the Sun itself produces ultra-violet faster and in greater quantity than any generator man could build and unless the crews of space-ships are very thoroughly protected against it there won't be any space-ships.

Maybe the BEMS from Arcturus will come around with something more serious but it is a better-than-even-money bet that they can't do any more about the laws governing radiation than we can. And if they can't space war will have to be fought with far more mundane weapons.

Well, what kind of weapons? That depends upon the kind of ships. You don't expect an earthly battleship to carry torpedoes because she will never get close enough to the enemy to fire them —or a destroyer to mount 16-inch guns because she can't carry them. So the problem of space war begins with that of designing a space-warship. And that brings up some interesting questions.

The first of them is the shape of the ship. The torpedo shape with brief wings, the type usually pictured, is very attractive. It is the only shape that could take off from earth and go out through the atmosphere. It keeps the machinery well away from the living spaces. For landing on the moon or an asteroid it is quite all right because it can be turned over and set down on its tail jets.

But when space warfare really gets going the torpedo shape will take a back space before a vessel built in space (probably at a satellite station) to operate and fight in space. And the shape of that ship will be a sphere. It is the strongest, the most economical for the use of the contained cubic capacity, but these are not the main reasons for building space-warships round. The reasons are those of military efficiency, which take precedence over all others when it comes to designing fighting equipment.

In the first place a sphere can be given more than one rocket exhaust. With more than one the spherical ship would have a maneuvering ability making immeasurably superior to the long, graceful torpedo. The latter would have to sweep around in curves of hundreds or thousands of miles, or change its course on gyros, which would take nearly as long. But the sphere, with a simple opposite-direction blast from its rockets, could halt, change course and be off.

Probably only two exhausts are necessary, but those we have to have. I am aware that the engineering problems of building a space-ship that way are very severe but so are the engineering problems of building an atomic submarine or a carrier to carry jet planes. However, when there is urgent military necessity for something, neither expense nor the difficulty of the problem is ever really allowed to stand in the way.

In the second place a sphere can be built with no blind angles of

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approach. The fighter airplane of today, with an enemy on his tail, is in trouble—and so will be a space-ship with an enemy on its exhaust. Of course, turrets can be mounted above or below the exhaust on a torpedo-shaped ship but they will never give quite the same protection as not having any blind angles at all.

In the third place the sphere is the most convenient shape for landing on the Moon or asteroids and they are going to be important as bases. And in the fourth place the armor of the sphere can carry the main structural stresses, making the interior structure light.

Using a spherical shape means size, of course, but so do several other necessary factors and it is impossible to avoid them all. This means that the warships of space will not be divided into classes of battleships, cruisers and destroyers like warships of the ocean. With an exception to be noted later all will be battleships. There is no reason for making them anything else.

Oceanic destroyers gain speed by sacrificing armor but there is no comparable gain in a space-ship. Once the jets are started and the original inertia overcome the heavy ship will travel as fast as the light one because the limiting factor is how much acceleration the crew can stand physically—and it's the same for both.

On earth the design of a ship is a compromise between the demands of armament, protection, speed and cruising radius, with the last the least important. For the space-ship speed will make its demands but they will not have to be satisfied at the expense of the other characteristics. However, cruising radius is something else.

The ruling consideration in the radius of action of an earth-ship is the ability to carry fuel. Stores for the crew were seldom a problem during the war, even though the food did sometimes run down to Spam and those incredible dehydrated potatoes. Ammunition became a problem in only a few cases. But in the space-navy all this will be changed.

Fuel does not look like a particularly serious problem. A given space-ship will be burning lots while she is using it but most of the time she'll be coasting on gained acceleration and will need fuel only for short bursts of maneuver during action. The true limiting factor in the radius of action of a space-warship is the stores for the crew—not food or water but most specifically air.

The problem with water is not supplying it but getting rid of it. For every five pounds of food you eat two pounds of water is the minimum result, exuded in various ways. And water is ridiculously easy to purify by distillation. Food itself can be carried in various concentrated forms but it is impossible to carry reserve air except in oxygen bottles under compression and it is very difficult to get

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rid of surplus unwanted carbon dioxide.

For stations in space air-purifiers have been suggested, consisting of algae operating in a churned water-tank. This would be all right for a station which has a steady motion in a determined orbit. But the space-battleship in action will be subject to violent gyrations which would do no good to the air-purifying system even if considerations of weight and space made it practical to install such a system in the first place.

Then there is the added danger that a single hit in so vital an installation would put the ship out of action for keeps while a few oxygen bottles blown up would not matter. So the space-battleship will probably have to depend on bottled air, like a pre-snorkel submarine, and the quantity she can carry will determine her radius of action.

This does not mean that she cannot make quite long voyages, since a ship of the dimensions we are contemplating could store quite a lot of air. But it does help to determine the strategy of space-warfare. It will be fundamentally a struggle for bases where more oxygen can be obtained. Not through going down into the atmosphere of Earth or the thin atmosphere of Mars or the questionable one of Venus. It means bases on the Moon and the asteroids.

The Moon and asteriods are made of rocks, on the surface at least, and practically all rocks are loaded with oxygen—47% in the crust of the Earth for example. With the kind of power that will be available by time we get space-ships, it will be a comparatively simple matter to separate these rock materials from their oxygen electrolytically. Carbon dioxide is partly oxygen, of course, but so stubbornly bonded that no ordinary electrolytic process will break it and it has the unpleasant quality of being a gas under electrolytic conditions.

Since the oxygen-producing machinery will be too heavy and bulky to carry aboard the space-ship the job will have to be done at air-refueling stations and these advanced bases will be the key of space-campaigns. Naturally, they will be powerfully fortified against attack from the enemy's space-fleet. Equally naturally they will be logical points of attack in the hope of limiting the enemy's operations by cutting his bases from under him.

Thus the overall strategy of a space-campaign will somewhat resemble that of the Pacific War, with each party trying to destroy or neutralize the enemy's bases while extending his own. If both have bases on the Moon or Mars there may even be ground campaigns in support of those in the skies. And getting control of one of those erratic asteroids that come within the orbit of Mars will count for ten.

What about armament? In stories of space warfare that get away

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from those improbable rays there is usually some kind of hyper-super-duper torpedo, rocket-propelled. But this only demonstrates that the authors of the stories are thinking in Earth-terms instead of space-terms.

It is perfectly plausible to include some torpedoes, probably with atomic warheads, in the armament of a space-ship—something that would knock out an enemy base or destroy a space-battleship at a single blow. But the torpedo will always be what military men call a weapon of opportunity.

They can't be used at all angles—it would be fatally easy for one of them to make a near-miss on the enemy craft and atom-bomb your own Moon base or some part of the Earth you didn't want atom-bombed. Earth's gravitational attraction would pull such a torpedo in from quite a distance out.

There is also the point that on Earth the torpedo is a comparatively short-range weapon, fired from concealment or under conditions where the torpedo-carrier approaches so rapidly it cannot be stopped—by a submarine underwater, by surface ships at night or from behind smoke-screens, by torpedo-planes that attack at ten times the speed of the target-ship.

None of these conditions can be realized in space-warfare. Even if the space-ship were painted black and operating in a planetary shadow (as in some stories) radar would pick it up at a distance at least equaling that from the Earth to the Moon.

And even black coloring would make the space-ship visible as it occluded the practically continuous blanket of stars visible in open space. You can't make a smoke-screen in space—you can make it, but it wouldn't hang and wouldn't be any use against radar if it did. Comparative speeds that would permit the torpedo-plane type of attack are simply unattainable.

Finally naval experience shows that fire is always opened at the greatest possible range where there is any chance of doing damage—and that range is usually maintained in the hope of avoiding hits. Only when one party has been so badly pounded that defeat seems inevitable is there an effort to close the range for torpedo or gunfire.

In space-war, given high visibility and the fact that there will be neither gravity nor air resistance to slow up shells, fire will be opened at extremely long ranges—hundreds of miles. At this distance, a rocket-torpedo, clearly indicating its presence by its trail of fire, will be quite easy to intercept—by shooting smaller rockets or shells with proximity fuses at it.

The time it will take the torpedo to cover the distance is the major factor. And running in to launch a torpedo from close range will be very difficult because of the low speed differential between the two parties and again because of the distance. So it is probable that

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most space-actions will be fought out with guns.

I said guns. But a very different type of gun from those most of us are familiar with, because this is another point where Earth-thinking must give way to space-thinking. When the breech-block of a gun aboard one of our cruisers is swung open to receive a new shell there is a brief moment when the gun forms an open connecting tube from the inside of the turret to the outside air.

This will never do aboard a space-ship—there is no air outside and the air from all over the vessel would rush in a tornado to escape into outer space. There will have to be some device for loading the gun in a vacuum or, since this might give trouble in case of a breakdown or a misfire, more likely an automatic tompion to close the mouth of the gun until there is another charge in the breech. This would have the advantage that the rush of air into the gun, evacuated by the previous firing, would automatically clean it of residual explosion products.

But this is not all. Since there is no air to set up resistances to take a projectile out of its proper path, there is no particular reason for rifling the gun. In fact it would be rather better not to. And while shells were mentioned, in connection with beating off rocket-torpedoes and would be very useful for that purpose, there is no reason whatever for employing them against another space-ship or the dome of an enemy base.

The reason for using a shell against an Earthbound ship is that after it gets through the side it explodes there and messes things up for a considerable radius. But a space-ship is vulnerable in a way that no Earth-ship ever is. If it loses its air it's the finish for everybody aboard.

A high-velocity solid shot, penetrating the side of a space-ship, could tear holes in several compartments and connect them all with the outside, causing disastrously rapid exhaustion of the air. It would be much more damaging than any shell, which would only ruin one or two compartments. For that matter it was discovered during the last war that a solid projectile which penetrated a tank and ricocheted around inside was quite as effective as a shell-burst.

A solid shot would have more penetrating power because of its greater mass and unwillingness to break up against armor. And there is also the law of military economics that requires you do everything with the least expensive weapon that will accomplish the purpose. A cast-steel bullet with a soft iron head to "grease" its way through armor will be both cheaper and more effective than any type of shell.

As an alternate type of ammunition for use against ships with exceptionally heavy armor, there might be some projectile using the

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shaped-charge principle. There's nothing wrong with carrying several different types of projectile for the same guns—both ship and field artillery do it right now.

The type and purpose of the projectiles also determine the size of the guns. The reason for using large-caliber guns on Earth are two —to get a bigger bursting charge at the receiving end and to obtain greater range by a larger dirving charge in the breech.

But in space a projectile would have infinite range, unless it fell into the gravitational attraction of some body, and the big bursting charge is not required. So the gun need be only just big enough to make the driving charge give it a very high muzzle-velocity.

Considering the question of ammunition stowage and supply, probably the best caliber would be between 3.5 and 6 inches, 90 and 155 millimeters. Liquid propellants give higher muzzle velocities than solid and would have the advantage of making a better seal around the projectile in the breech. They could be pumped in from metered tubes.

After the air-tight doors have been closed the men who serve these guns will go into action in space-suits, breathing the air around them but having the suits fitted with automatic valves that will close down the moment the compartment begins to lose air. Damage-control parties will have special apparatus for patching holes—probably quick-drying viscous plastics with a silicone base, because of their imperviousness to temperature changes.

What about fire controls? The calculations for them will be arduous because of the distances and speeds involved. But Dr. John D. Clark has pointed out that two space-ships engaged in a fight, no matter what courses they are traveling with relation to the Sun or the planets, are in a single plane with relation to each other and so are all the projectiles fired by both of them.

This plane may tilt violently as they maneuver but at the moment of firing the line from gun to target, or predicted position of target, is a perfectly flat and straight line. This is a much easier ballistic problem than in any Earthly firing, where gravity, air resistance and for long ranges even the curvature and rotation of the Earth must be considered.

The guns will certainly have automatic radar controls and a high rate of fire. The only trouble is that the calculations fed into the controls will have to be made at lightning speeds, in micro-seconds —which means electronic computers. And this brings up another difference between space-warfare and the kind we know, though it may extend to war on Earth.

It is possible to make an electronic computer non-functional by overloading it with data or to drive it electronically insane by feeding it undesirable data. Space-warfare is

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therefore bound to include all sorts of decoy devices—small metal balloons have been suggested—that will register on the enemy's radar as space-ships and set his guns swinging wildly or firing at phantoms.

The only type of ship to which all that has been said does not apply is the space-minelayer. These can be quite small as compared with the battleships, need carry no armor and can use the torpedo-shape for operating from an earth base. Some years ago Malcolm Jameson suggested small iron spheres as mines, strewn along the enemy's path where he would run into them—but the matter is not quite that simple.

If the space-minelayer merely dumped the spheres overboard as an Earthly minelayer does they would become part of a new small gravitational system around the minelayer, and would follow her around like Mary's little lamb.

The mines of space-warfare will have to be provided with some kind of power that will take them into a predetermined orbit around Earth, the Moon or an asteroid after the minelayer has dropped them. Only enough to set up the orbit, mind—after that they could take care of themselves.

Also it is doubtful whether a mere ball of solid iron would smash up the works of an armored space-ship unless she met it at high speed on an absolute collision course. The more normal event would be for the mine to be picked up by the small but perceptible gravitational attraction of the space-ship and travel with it as a satellite. So the mines of space will probably have to be fairly large and contain heavy explosive charges, probably with proximity fuses.

Still the advantages of mining are so great that they will undoubtedly play a large part in space-warfare. Asteroid or Moon bases can be defended by minefields, which would keep an enemy at a distance until he had painstakingly located the pesky objects and shot them up, during which time the ship would be an ideal target for guns on the ground.

And one striking feature about this space minefield must always be remembered, a feature that makes it different from anything encountered on the ocean. The fields will be constantly moving. Fixed in an orbit 25,000 miles above the Earth a space-mine would always remain over the same Earthly spot and there is a similar critical distance for the Moon, Mars and the asteroids.

But few of the mines will be at exactly that distance. Unless they are they will be tiny satellites, revolving around their primaries at greater or less speeds, constantly on the go. A space-ship won't have to hit them. They will hunt it up.

There is also the fact that mining in war is not merely a defensive tactic. In World War I the German

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time in thy flight

by . . . Ray Bradbury

The circus, Hallowe'en, the Glorious Fourth may go—yet eternal is their pull on a child's heart.

A WIND BLEW THE long years away past their hot faces.

The Time Machine stopped.

"Nineteen hundred and twenty-eight," said Janet. The two boys looked past her.

Mr. Fields stirred. "Remember, you're here to observe the behavior of these ancient people. Be inquisitive, be intelligent, observe."

"Yes," said the girl and the two boys in crisp khaki uniforms. They wore identical haircuts, had identical wrist-watches, sandals and coloring of hair, eyes, teeth and skin, though they were not related.

"Shh!" said Mr. Fields.

They looked out at a little Illinois town in the spring of the year. A cool mist lay on the early morning streets.

Far down the street a small boy came running in the last light of the marble-cream moon. Somewhere a great clock struck five A.M. far away. Leaving tennis-shoe prints softly in the quiet lawns the boy stepped near the invisible Time Machine and cried up to a high dark house window.

The house window opened. Another boy crept down the roof

Most Ray Bradbury readers seem to think of him as a sort of Charles Addams character sprung to life. Actually he is a handsome, cheerful and enthusiastic transplanted Californian with wife (1) and children (2), who looks far more at home over a broiled steak than a dish of pickled owl's eyes. Yet few living authors have vast sweep of fantasy or chill brush of horror. We're proud to offer his newest story.

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to the ground. The two boys ran off with banana-filled mouths into the dark cold morning.

"Follow them," whispered Mr. Fields. "Study their life patterns. Quick!"

Janet and William and Robert ran on the cold pavements of spring, visible now, through the slumbering town, through a park. All about lights flickered, doors clicked and other children rushed alone or in gasping pairs down a hill to some gleaming blue tracks.

"Here it comes!" The children milled about before dawn. Far down the shining tracks a small light grew seconds later into steaming thunder.

"What is it!" screamed Janet.

"A train, silly, you've seen pictures of them!" shouted Robert.

And as the Time Children watched from the train stepped gigantic grey elephants, steaming the pavements with their mighty waters, lifting question-mark nozzles to the cold morning sky. Cumbrous wagons rolled from the long freight flats, red and gold. Lions roared and paced in boxed darkness.

"Why—*this* must be a—circus!" Janet trembled.

"You think so? Whatever happened to them?"

"Like Christmas, I guess. Just vanished, long ago."

Janet looked around. "Oh, it's awful, isn't it."

The boys stood numbed. "It sure is."

Men shouted in the first faint gleam of dawn. Sleeping cars drew up, dazed faces blinked out at the children. Horses clattered like a great fall of stones on the pavement.

Mr. Fields was suddenly behind the children. "Disgusting, barbaric, keeping animals in cages. If I'd known this was here I'd never let you come see. This is a terrible ritual."

"Oh, yes." But Janet's eyes were puzzled. "And yet, you know, it's like a nest of maggots. I want to study it."

"I don't know," said Robert, his eyes darting, his fingers trembling. "It's pretty crazy. We might try writing a thesis on it if Mr. Fields says it's all right . . ."

Mr. Fields nodded. "I'm glad you're digging in here, finding motives, studying this Horror. All right—we'll see the circus this afternoon."

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Janet.

The Time Machine hummed.

"So that was a circus," said Janet, solemnly.

The Trombone circus died in their ears. The last thing they saw was candy-pink trapeze people whirling while baking powder clowns shrieked and bounded.

"You must admit psycho-vision's better," said Robert, slowly.

"All those nasty animal smells, the excitement." Janet blinked. "That's bad for children, isn't it?

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And those older people seated with the children. Mothers, fathers, they called them. Oh, that *was* strange."

Mr. Fields put some marks in his class grading book.

Janet shook her head numbly. "I want to see it all again. I've missed the motives somewhere. I want to make that run across town again in the early morning. The cold air on my face—the sidewalk under my feet—the circus train coming in. Was it the air and the early hour that made the children get up and run to see the train come in? I want to retrace the entire pattern. Why should they do it, why should they be excited? I feel I've missed out on the answer."

"They all smiled so much," said William.

"Manic-depressives," said Robert.

"What are summer vacations? I heard them talk about it." Janet looked at Mr. Fields.

"They spent their summers racing about like idiots, beating each other up," replied Mr. Fields seriously.

"I'll take our State Engineered summers of work for children anytime," said Robert, looking at nothing, his voice faint.

The Time Machine stopped again.

"The Fourth of July," announced Mr. Fields. "Nineteen hundred and twenty-eight. An ancient holiday when people blew each other's fingers off."

They stood before the same house on the same street but on a soft summer evening. Fire wheels hissed, on front porches laughing children tossed things out that went bang!

"Don't run!" cried Mr. Fields. "It's not war, don't be afraid!"

But Janet's and Robert's and William's faces were pink, now blue, now white with fountains of soft fire.

"We're all right," said Janet, standing very still.

"Happily," announced Mr. Fields, "they prohibited fireworks a century ago, did away with the whole messy explosion."

Children did fairy dances, weaving their names and destinies on the dark summer air with white sparklers.

"I'd like to do that," said Janet, softly. "Write my name on the air. See? I'd like that."

"What?" Mr. Fields hadn't been listening.

"Nothing," said Janet.

"Bang!" whispered William and Robert, standing under the soft summer trees, in shadow, watching, watching the red, white, and green fires on the beautiful summer night lawns. "*Bang!*"

October.

The Time Machine paused for the last time, an hour later in the month of burning leaves. People bustled into dim houses carrying pumpkins and corn shocks. Skeletons danced, bats flew, candles flamed, apples swung in empty doorways.

"Hallowe'en," said Mr. Fields.

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"The acme of horror. This was the age of superstition, you know. Later they banned the Grimm Brothers, ghosts, skeletons and all that claptrap. You children, thank God, were raised in an antiseptic world of no shadows or ghosts. You had decent holidays like William C. Chatterton's Birthday, Work Day and Machine Day."

They walked by the same house in the empty October night, peering in at the triangle-eyed pumpkins, the masks leering in black attics and damp cellars. Now, inside the house, some party children squatted telling stories, laughing!

"I want to be inside with them," said Janet at last.

"Sociologically, of course," said the boys.

"No," she said.

"What?" asked Mr. Fields.

"No, I just want to be inside, I just want to stay here, I want to see it all and be here and never be anywhere else, I want firecrackers and pumpkins and circusses, I want Christmasses and Valentines and Fourths, like we've seen."

"This is getting out of hand . . ." Mr. Fields started to say.

But suddenly Janet was gone. "Robert, William, come on!" She ran. The boys leaped after her.

"Hold on!" shouted Mr. Fields. "Robert! William, I've got you!" He seized the last boy but the other escaped. "Janet, Robert—come back here! You'll never pass into the seventh grade! You'll fail, Janet, Bob—*Bob!*"

An October wind blew wildly down the street, vanishing with the children off among moaning trees.

William twisted and kicked.

"No, not you, too, William, you're coming home with me. We'll teach those other two a lesson they won't forget. So they want to stay in the Past, do they?" Mr. Fields shouted so everyone could hear. "All right, Janet, Bob, stay in this horror, in this chaos! In a few weeks you'll come sniveling back here to me and my Time Machine. But go on, anyway! I'm leaving you here to go mad in this world!"

He hurried William to the Time Machine. The boy was sobbing. "Don't make me come back here on any more Field Excursions ever again, please, Mr. Fields, please . . ."

"Shut up!"

Almost instantly the Time Machine whisked away toward the Future, toward the underground hive cities, the metal buildings, the metal flowers, the metal lawns.

"Goodbye, Janet, Bob!"

A great cold October wind blew through the town like water. And when it had ceased blowing it had blown all the children, whether invited or uninvited, masked or unmasked, to the doors of houses which closed upon them. There was not a running child anywhere in the night. The wind whined away in the bare tree tops.

And inside the big house, in the candlelight, someone was pouring cold apple cider all around, to everyone, no matter *who* they were.

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it's in the blood

by . . . Eric Frank Russell

Space may flow in a young man's veins. But at times the laws of heredity can take tragic twists.

HE POSED FOUR-SQUARE in the driving seat and threaded a way through thick traffic of which he was no more than subconsciously aware. It was as if the big automobile were part of him, a mechanical extension of his brain and limbs, making of him a sort of machine-age centaur.

"It was the most wonderful day of my life—and I'm living it again through you," he said, with difficulty holding his voice steady.

The car glided smoothly around a parked truck, straightened out. He shot a swift glance at his quiet passenger, absorbing in a split second the gray uniform with silver buttons, the fresh young face so closely resembling his own in days gone by. Then his attention came back to the road.

"You're not jumpy, son?" he asked gently.

"No, Dad." The reply was automatic.

"You have every right to be. I was—a little jumpy when my turn came. Sort of all bunched up inside."

A black cigar arrowed across the

Eric Frank Russell, one of the eminent members of the modern English school of science fiction writing, is best known for two of his novels—Sinister Barrier and Dreadful Sanctuary. In both of these Mr. Russell's incredible extrapolative abilities and ingenious plotting have been italicized by his very special talent for creating an atmosphere of sheer horror without resort to clanking and noisome Gothic stage-settings. In this short story, necessarily uncluttered by structural intricacies, we see how he does it. For horror is very much here.

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horizon, left a widening vapor-trail behind it.

"There she goes—o u t w a r d bound." He licked his lips nervously. "When your mother was alive she used to look for the ship and wave. Of course I couldn't see her and she couldn't see me. But I knew she was there."

His son did not answer. He hadn't looked at the departing space-ship. His gaze was on the shops lining the street.

"Maybe someday a girl will wave for you." The father gave a little chuckle of satisfaction. "You will return from Mars or Ceres and walk up the graveled path and hear her singing in the kitchen just like your mother did."

His strong hands twisted the wheel, took the car around a corner. He talked on.

"She was always singing. *Oh, Star of Eve* and stuff like that. She had a pretty voice. It never got her anywhere. No concert halls. She sang just for me."

"Yes, Dad."

They stopped for a traffic light. The younger man stared at a shop. Its window was filled with musical instruments—banjos, mandolins, guitars, accordeons, violins, trumpets. A baby-grand piano stood in the middle of the display, lid open, keys exposed, a sheet of music on its stand. His blue eyes devoured it as if it were a tender girl in a clinging transparent summer frock.

The light changed to green. The car moved on.

"Yes, your mother always was inclined that way. A songbird with raven hair. When you were four she bought you that toy piano, remember?"

"I remember."

"You hammered it for hours." He clicked his teeth deprecatingly. "Almost drove me out of my mind. You went on and on until you could pick out a tune. *Three Blind Mice.* Pretty good for a child of four." A pause, then, "But you're grown up now, aren't you, son?"

"At twenty I ought to be."

"That's the way to look at it. Your mother was a fine woman, a wonderful woman. All the same I can tell you something you ought to have learned by the time you're my age."

"What's that, Dad?"

"A mother is all right for bringing up daughters but it takes a father to raise a son. Yes, *sir!* What's more a man needs a man's job. A space-pilot is every inch a man and none come better. A spaceman is a hell of a lot more man than any soft-handed musician. I once saw a fellow thumping a piano in a saloon. He was nothing but a no-good bum."

"I didn't want to play in saloons, Dad."

"Of course not, Tom. Perhaps he didn't either. Perhaps he'd had dreams that never came true. So he sat in a saloon with butts on the floor around him and played for beer. Supposing you'd gone to that

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foreign college your mother talked about, the . . . the—"

"Brussels *Conservatoire* of Music."

"Yes, that dump. What would it have got you?"

"A degree."

"And then what?"

"Does it matter now?"

"In a way. I was thinking of when you retire. If you pass your solo test today you'll be a fully-qualified space-pilot."

"And so . . . ?"

"It won't last forever, Tom. A pilot is too old at forty. Ultimately they'll offer you a ground post or release you on pension. And you'll still be young." He gave a jovial laugh. "Plenty of time for piano playing then, eh?"

"I suppose so." The words were flat.

"You bet there will. You'll be able to go in for it in a big way, foreign college and all, with money behind you. No half-starving in an attic for you—no hammering the notes in a cheap dance hall. A musician *and* a gentleman."

Silence piled deep while they accelerated, shot ahead of a lumbering bus, left it behind them.

"But above all a spaceman. Pilot Fanshaw Number Six. Just like your father, your grandfather and three more ahead of him. We've been part of the space-service since the first ships landed on the Moon. The family name is a byword in space. There has always been a Fanshaw flying the space-lanes."

"I know, Dad." Again that curious flatness.

"The reason is easy to understand. We're natural-born pilots. We're made that way. It's in the blood. It's part of us."

He studied himself in the rear-view mirror. Baggy jowls, grey hair of course—but the eyes remained clear and steady.

"That's important, Tom. Five thousand candidates go through the college every year and never more than fifty reach their solo flight. One in a hundred—and many of those fail on the last lap solely because they aren't naturals. It isn't enough for a man to be physically fit, highly intelligent and top of the class in all his exams. He has also to be a natural. Pilots are born, not made."

A traffic block held them. Nearby a loudspeaker in a radio store trilled Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*. Tom hummed it silently, so that his father could not hear. The block untangled itself. The car surged forward once again.

"A man who's a natural becomes part of his ship, a veritable living part of it. Injury to the vessel is injury to himself. He is born that way. All the Fanshaws were born that way. Know what they will do when you land her unaided and without a scratch?"

"No, Dad. What do you think?" The question was mechanical, unbacked by curiosity.

"They won't cheer you and clap

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your back like they would with anyone else. They'll shrug and walk away, saying, 'He's a Fanshaw—what else can you expect?' See what I mean? You're a foregone conclusion."

"I hope so. I really hope so." The flatness became uneven.

The car swung off the road, stopped between a pair of huge gates. Customs sheds stood near, a tall control-tower rose farther back. Several great metal cylinders gleamed in the distance, their tails down, their noses pointing to the sky.

A uniformed attendant came forward, saluted respectfully. "Morning, Mr. Fanshaw."

"Morning, Harry. This is the day my boy shows them how."

Tom said with faint surprise, "You're not coming inside to watch, Dad?"

"No, son." He grinned, reached across, opened the door. "When my old man brought me here he said, 'You go take it all on your own. The boy who is brought along by his father is a sissy.' Then he went home, waited for me to turn up by mid-afternoon with a gold cord around my left shoulder." His grin widened. "I got it. I was as big a man as he. I knew it then for the first time."

"All right." Tom got out, hesitated, looked at his right hand, shoved it into his pocket.

"That's the spirit," approved his father. "No shaking hands. No wishing luck. Fanshaws don't need it." Leaning sidewise, he lowered his voice, bestowed a significant wink. "I'll tell you something in strict confidence—it's dead easy!"

Then he backed up, turned the car toward town, drove in at fast pace. Tom would make it all right. Twenty take-offs and landings with skilled instructors aboard is one thing. Doing it all on one's own-some is something else—but Tom would make it. The son of his father. The Fanshaws had it bred into their bones.

They would give Tom a seven-hundred-ton test-boat—they would watch him boost it beyond the atmosphere, land it, step out. They would hand him his gold cord, tell him when to report for his first *pukka* space trip and send him home.

Almost every week a test-boat was badly dented and once a month some ambitious youngster broke his neck because he could not make himself an integral part of his vessel. Tom wasn't like that. He'd land her astride a handkerchief without a scratch. What is in the bood must come out when called by circumstance.

He tooled the car into an underground garage three blocks from home, spent five minutes jockeying it into parking position, came out just too late to hear the moan of Tom's ship going up.

It was one minute past ten. Tom would have blown his tubes precisely at ten because time was a

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most important factor. One second too early, one second too late, would cost him a mark. Five seconds either way would cost him five marks. The little ship was up and away beyond the clouds by now. Involuntarily he searched the sky, could see nothing of it.

He strode along the sidewalk, ignoring the shops, not heeding the passers-by, thinking. A pity mother would not be there to sing *Oh, Star of Eve* when Tom came back. She would be mighty proud of her boy, spruce in his uniform with its gleaming gold cord. She would be so happy and proud at having given the space-lines another Fanshaw.

Chewing his nether lip he crossed a street, reached the middle of the second block. The ground perked. Store windows quivered. A moment or two later a roar came down from the sky and ended in a crack like the snapping of a gigantic stick.

Facing him was a fat man, gaping fascinatedly at something far behind his back, something he refused to turn to see. The fat man said, "My God!" and ran past him. Others ran. Workingmen, businessmen, housewives, stenographers, children, all ran the same way, toward something behind him.

He walked straight ahead, slowly —very slowly—beating against the mainstream of running people. They brushed past him, pushed at him, buffeted him, shouldered him aside.

Moving like one in a dream he crossed another street, his legs sluggish, his eyes level, looking steadfastly straight ahead. In the middle of the third block he entered a building, took the elevator to the top floor. With intense deliberation he fitted his key into a lock, went into his own apartment, closed the door gently and did not hear the click of its catch.

Still slowly he crossed the room to his bed, lowered himself and sat there, facing his own private hell.

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subs were pretty thoroughly mined in by the barrages across the North Sea and English Channel. In World War II what was left of the Japanese fleet was immobilized in its harbors by mines. Space-mines would serve a similar purpose of closing a planetoid or an area to all access.

They could serve a tactical purpose as well by limiting avenues of approach. Not that they couldn't be eliminated—rocket torpedo fire would be something quite different and more effective than the same kind of fire against a space-battleship capable of striking back.

But this would take time and time is the one thing no one can afford to waste in a kind of war where everything will move at speeds exceeding those of the planets.

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# of those who came

by . . . George Longdon

The alien scheme was perfect—a night landing, infiltration, human disguises. Fortunately for us the Policeman was awaiting them.

EVENING SUN TOUCHED the top of the blue hills. The lonely slopes lay in shadow, grey and dim, and I stopped the saloon half way along the road that wound down into the valley. Below was a single house, seen among trees, and above it oscillated a faint yellow radiance, coming from an indistinguishable source.

I sat motionless, gloved hands on the wheel, feeling no surprise. The yellow halo slowly shrank, dropping down towards the rooftop, and coalescing into a spheroid which gradually sank from view behind the house. A dim reflection on the trees showed it was still there, concealed by the building. I started the saloon and began to wind down into the valley.

The sky was growing dark. Seen across the valley the house had only been a dim outline and it passed from view as the saloon sped into the valley bottom, where a river ran between wooded banks. I drove to the bridge. The saloon murmured across and began to climb the winding road towards the house. Fifty yards away I parked the vehicle under trees and got out.

While the birth and development of the so-called "modern" science fiction story has been almost an exclusively an American process, the root of the matter lies definitely on the eastern shores of the Atlantic—in the works of Cyrano, of Voltaire, of Verne, Conan Doyle and Dunsany. Of recent years, we are glad to report, an increasing number of British authors have been reasserting their place in Sol, men like Temple, Clarke, M'Intosh and Russell. Now, in Mr. Longdon, another English star, rises.

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The night was very still, and the yellow reflections that had illuminated the rear of the house were gone. Moving silently I crept near, parting bushes to look into the garden.

The spherical vessel rested on turf behind the house but the power that sustained it had been turned off, leaving it a fragile tracery of spidery girders almost as thin as wire, vulnerable now that the lines of force forming the hull had been collapsed. Two green vaporous shapes moved inside the vessel, visible through the tracery of its sides. I grew completely still, watching.

Two, I thought. Only two. I had expected that there would be *three* forms in the vessel.

After a long time the vaporous shapes slowly left the machine and crossed the turf towards the house. They were of diffused outline, slightly luminous in the gathering dark, tall as a man. Only when they were gone from view round the corner of the house did I step out from the bushes towards the ship that had come so far.

Its tracery of fragile members buckled under the blows of the spanner brought from the car, bending and folding into a tangle of jointed wire. Within moments it was destroyed beyond even the skill of its owners to repair. Silence returned. A few stars, immeasurably remote worlds, had begun to show in the heavens. I looked up, searching for bright Sirius from where I knew the vessel had come. But drifting cloud obscured that section of the night sky.

A green shape came round the corner of the house and stopped. I sensed its surprise, quickly followed by antagonism and fury. Glowing it came across the turf, its speed increasing to catch me.

I turned on my heels and ran, slipping through the bushes to the road. The saloon was not far. I dragged open the door, jumped in . . . and not until half the valley lay behind did I stop, looking back.

The two green shapes were searching round the house. For a long time they passed in and out among the bushes like mysterious pillars of green light, then they returned to the house, were lost from view. My agitation began to subside. I told myself that things had worked out well on the whole, that as much had been accomplished as could be expected. Obviously they had not believed their coming was anticipated, must now be regretting having left their vessel unguarded.

I drove slowly back towards the house. It was unfortunate that there had been no time to bring a weapon —or at least one of such a type as would be effective against the beings from the spheroid. There was every reason why their physical make-up should be familiar to me. They could control matter, but were not matter themselves. A life-form totally dissimilar to any known on Earth, they were sentient, highly intelligent, yet composed of molecules as insubstantial as those

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of the air. My sworn duty was to destroy them. Theirs was to eliminate me.

An opening in the bushes permitted a view of the rear of the house. The broken vessel was gone, but whether hidden away with the hope of repair or concealed because its presence would arouse suspicion, could not be decided. The house was silent and I crept round it.

Two men had just emerged and were walking quickly away down the road. One was a trifle more than average height, the other an inch or two below. They were of average build, quite undistinguished. To my trained eye they appeared not as individuals, but as types.

A good disguise, I thought. They had speedily adopted the appearance of average types of the life-forms among which they would now move. That offered concealment, yet opportunity for unlimited activity. There was not a man on Earth who would not swear each was a human, just like himself.

I went round the house quickly, looking inside through each window. No light showed, nor was there any movement. Satisfied, I went back to the car. Apparently the vessel had brought two only, despite supposition to the contrary.

The brilliant headlights soon picked out the two figures walking quickly down towards the bottom of the valley. I slowed, reaching back to lock the saloon doors on the inside, and stopped near them, my face in shadow. The slightly taller figure came to my window, and I put it down an inch.

"We'd like a lift on into town," he said.

They did it well, I thought. Very well—had studied everything down to the slight local accent, and adopted it automatically. Everyone would swear the two were exactly what they appeared to be.

"I don't recognise you," I said. "You strangers hereabouts?"

The figure hesitated, nodding, one hand already on the doorhandle, trying to open it.

"We're salesmen for a big business concern," he said. "A cab was to pick us up, but must have mistaken our instructions. So we thought we'd walk on as it's only a mile or so. But we'd appreciate that lift . . ."

"Sorry—got four friends to pick up just down the road." I said and accelerated and let in the clutch. The little man had remained in front of me, and he did not move. They were like that, I thought—they knew there was no danger, and sometimes forgot, especially at the beginning . . .

The wing of the saloon passed through him. When I looked back both were walking quickly on after me.

I sped for town. They had not suspected and I had learned enough to feel safe in going on. Eliminating them was now the problem. No form of physical violence could succeed. Poison was out—they would not eat. Gassing was im-

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possible—they did not breathe though they could simulate chest movements when necessary to complete their disguise. They were virtually ageless, and did not reckon time by any standard used on Earth. By conscious will they could form the molecules making up their substance into any shape they wished, simulating an outline which would provide protection in the environment they inhabited.

The proprietor of the next town's only hotel greeted me with smiles, and I saw that he remembered my week's stay and large tips.

"I'm expecting a couple of friends," I told him. "Commercial travelers here for a deal. You might give me a ring when they come in."

He beamed. "I will see to it personally."

"Good," I said.

I went towards the stairs, and paused, looking back. "Oh, don't say I asked after them. I want to look in on them as a surprise—get it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Smith, certainly," he said.

Smith, I thought. But it was as good a name as any . . . In my job one seldom used one's own name.

Alone in my room, I reviewed the situation. The newcomers had arrived as expected and I had traced them. That there were only two, instead of the three anticipated, was the only error but it simplified matters. Two would be easier to deal with and my knowledge of them was complete. They must not be allowed to become lost amid Earth's teeming millions or they would become a secret, ever-present and certainly-active menace. My job was to follow and eliminate them at the earliest possible moment.

Presently the bell rang on my door. I got up, crossed to it and then remembered I had not switched on the light. It would look odd to be seen there without it.

I depressed the switch and opened the door. "Yes?"

"Your friends are just in," the manager said. "They've booked until midday tomorrow."

"You're sure it's them?" I asked.

"A think so, sir—a Mr. Dulice, a bit above average height, booked for himself and his friend . . ."

"That'll be them," I agreed. *Dulice,* I thought. It was as good a name as Diesnar and the latter sounded odd by Earth standards. I wondered if the manager had noticed the light come on under the crack of the door. "I was dozing," I said. Best to make sure. "Thanks. Needn't mention me to them. Maybe I'll leave it until tomorrow."

"Their room is No. Thirteen, end of the corridor," he said.

"Thanks. Good night."

He left and I wondered what he would do if he knew *what* the occupants of Room 13 were. Not respectable Mr. Dulice and companion but Diesnar and Iago, nonphysical entities playing their usual game of imitation—a game that had been perfected by millions of

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generations of evolutionary selection.

The room clock showed two hours until midnight. That gave about seven hours in all, until dawn. I had known that my visit to Room 13 would certainly not be delayed until then despite my assurance to the contrary. Instead the hours of darkness would see much activity.

I unlocked a trunk and took out a light metal box, which a second key fitted. The weapon inside was not recognisable as such by Earth standards but might have passed for an antique pedestal of bronze, ending in a cup in which a carved crystal rested. But it was not a pedestal and not bronze—was instead the product of much scientific research and inestimably valuable. I doubted whether half a dozen such instruments existed in the cosmos. Those that did were in safe keeping.

With it in a pocket I went out and walked silently to Room 13. A faint light burned in the hall stairway below but the hotel was quiet. I recalled that the manager had said something about being short-staffed. The bronzen object fitted snugly in one hand and my fingers came upon a lever which could be depressed. Holding it I tapped. Silence followed. I tapped again. The knob turned and the door opened.

"I have a message," I said evenly.

The door opened fully and I went in, moving quickly to the right along the wall, my left hand extended back towards the door and on the lighting switch.

"You've forgotten the light," I said.

The switch clicked under my pressure. A glance showed me Dulice, alias Diesnar, was gone. The other—the smaller and weaker—stared at me.

"I was not expecting anyone," he murmured. "You've made some error . . ."

I examined him without speaking. His features were so near average, his dress and appearance so near the normal, that no person in all the world would have given him a second glance.

"You do it very well," I said.

His astonishment, dismay and terror could be sensed. He did not show it—an appearance of terror would have to be simulated consciously and would serve no useful purpose. Hence it was absent. But his bland expression was not all I had to go by.

"Surely—you think me someone else?" he said softly.

He was moving slowly back. I quickly closed the door and stood with my back to it.

"No," I said. "No, not someone else—Iago."

It took him a moment to integrate and recognise the Earth oral vibrations forming his true name. But I saw that he had done so and knew me now and why I had come.

"Better keep still," I said. "Where's—Mr. Dulice?"

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The silence was so long I thought he was not going to speak. His face shone in the light. His lips almost seemed to smile.

"Gone," he said at last.

"Obviously. And where?"

"That you can find out."

"It would save trouble if you—told me," I murmured. I took the bronzen pedestal from my pocket. He saw it. His eyes fixed on the carved crystal, and I sensed his terror anew. It was stronger, this time—the terror of a being faced with death.

"Why should I tell you?" he asked evenly.

"Because, if you do not I shall kill you."

He shrugged. It was well done. "I do not fear death."

"Odd," I said. "*I* do."

My fingers tightened slightly on the level which controlled the compact, immeasurably complicated apparatus inside the hollow plinth.

"You came far enough," I said, "to this planet. You might have escaped more easily if you'd landed near a large city, though I can guess you wanted to avoid observation. This time your effort to appear quite average was a mistake. However, where is Diesnar?"

The eyes looking back at me were cool, but I sensed and knew the terror and decision in the other's heart.

"That's for you—to find," he breathed.

I pressed the lever. It was no use waiting. The crystal hummed and sang, ringing like taut wires in the wind, and I closed my eyes, not wanting to see Iago. I wished him no harm, personally. Might even have liked him in some ways, despite his weakness. He was different from Diesnar, the leader, who was strong enough for both.

I opened my eyes in time to see the last wisps of green mist shred away into nothing and dissipate on the air. A few moments passed and a knock came on the door. I opened it.

"Yes?"

The manager appeared apologetic. "I was just retiring, sir—did you ring? I was passing . . ."

"No," I said. "We don't want anything." I put the pedestal in my pocket—the crystal had cooled quickly. "Thanks all the same. Oh—do you know where Mr. Dulice went?"

The manager shook his head. "I haven't seen him come down, sir. I've been at the reception desk—we're shortstaffed, though I've got a new man to take over."

I went back to my room. The annihilation of Iago gave me no elation. I had not supposed him difficult to deal with but his companion would be very different. Diesnar was clever and a foe anyone might justly fear.

I locked the piezo-electric crystal and waveform generator away in its metal case and stood by the window, the light out so that no revealing shadow fell upon the glass. Wind-driven clouds were passing a

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weak moon and the little town was asleep. I knew Mr. Dulice would not be asleep but watching somewhere . . .

With infinite caution I opened the window and went out upon the iron fire-escape, listening. An alley lay below, lit by a single lamp where it met an adjoining street. At the dim end of the alley, scarcely discernible from the shadows, stood a man. I withdrew and went down into the hall, where a youth dozed behind a lit desk. I did not give him a second glance.

"Just going out to get some books from my car," I said.

The streets were as near deserted as did not matter. The alley was like a well, stretching way into complete blackness. I followed the one wall, knowing risks were greatest in the section under the lamp. But risks had to be taken. Agents who uphold law and order are not chosen from the timid.

The lamp behind, the gloom ahead was complete. Clouds had banked against the moon so that even the high rooftops flanking the alley could not be seen against the sky. A car passed along the road, sending down after me a brief humming. I sensed that my enemy was very near, hating me and probably already aware that Iago was dead. There could be no half-measures in this hunt. My instructions were to annihilate them. Guessing that, Mr. Dulice's reactions were readily predictable.

The wall at my back, the bricks rough under my hands, I edged on into the blackness, listening often, and with every sense strung to its highest point of receptivity. I sensed that the figure anyone would take for an ordinary commercial traveller, Mr. Dulice, was nearer. If the moon came up it was as Mr. Dulice that he would be visible.

That was how the imitative adaptibility of my quarry worked—he had become an average representative of the creatures among whom he sought to hide. That process was largely instinctive, the outcome of an ancestry where survival had depended upon the perfect imitation of other life-forms. Those whose imitative processes had been less than perfect had on the whole survived less well. That was how evolution worked and Mr. Dulice was at the tail end of a long evolutionary period and his imitation of an average human life-form was excellent.

The tiny sound of something brushing stones froze me against the wall. I realised that I should have brought the resonant disintegrator. The knowledge of my error ran through me like a cold fear. In this job those who made errors seldom had the opportunity to repeat them—instead they died . . . But that little pedestal-shaped weapon was special. I had adopted the habit of locking it away to guard against its loss. Accidents could happen—and that pedestal had to be checked in when my task

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was finished. Better that I never return at all than return without it.

Diesnar would deduce that I carried it, I decided. By playing on that belief I could keep my advantage.

"Mr. Dulice," I whispered.

Neither of us would want anyone else in the town to know we were other than we appeared. He would not want a howling mob chasing him, even though they could not harm him. As for myself I preferred secrecy.

No reply came. A gap in the moving cloud let a weak moonray glow momentarily into the alley. Directly opposite me, his back to the wall, was Dulice. We could have touched hands by reaching out.

The moonlight went. Somewhere in the distance a whistle sounded and wheels on rails. That would be the 2 A.M. electric-train passing south, I thought. I had not known it was already quite so late.

"Mr. Dulice," I said quietly, "I have killed your companion . . ."

His terror could be sensed, so strong was the emotion. Had he been a real man his breathing would have sounded heavily.

"There *have* been times when we allowed one of you to live," I said evenly. That was true—but only a long time ago when new arrivals such as Diesnar had been less well equipped. "Would you guarantee to put in our hands all the information you possess of your companions, their names and plans?"

Came a scarcely audible rustle, then silence. It seemed apparent that Mr. Dulice expected immediate annihilation. I guessed that his terror was so extreme he had for the moment lost the power to use the pseudo-larynx which was now part of his make-up.

"Come," I said. "I expect an answer—in the circumstances."

"You underestimate me . . ."

The words were a whisper—and from high up on my left. I moved out into the alley and saw his shadow on the iron fire-escape, ascending rapidly. I ran to the ladder, climbing. He went through the window into my room. When I reached the window the door had just closed. The metal box containing the pedestal was gone.

We only made mistakes like that once, I thought, running for the door. The corridor was empty—so were the stairs and hall. The youth was frankly asleep now, snoring. I passed him and emerged into the street.

Diesnar would be waiting somewhere. He would prefer I did not live for while I lived he was listed among the hunted.

A clock struck loudly. I crossed the street and watched the hotel for a moment. The building was dark except for the glass above the entrance door. Mr. Dulice might not try to open the metal box but merely hide it. Either way, he now had a ponderous advantage—that of knowing the apparatus was not in my possession.

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A man was a long way down the street at a corner, watching, and began walking towards me. He was very slightly over average height—just such a man as one might meet a thousand times in a thousand cities of the Earth.

I withdrew round the nearest corner and looked back. The man was following—the distance between us had decreased. Our roles had changed, I thought. Mr. Dulice had become the hunter, I the hunted. It was a role he would adopt readily, one well suited to his character.

The buildings thinned a little as I went eastwards through the town. Every time I looked back my follower was there. He wanted secrecy as much as I—would play the game the way I led until very near the end.

Waste lots slipped behind and a viaduct bridge. I went off it onto turf. At my back was a high wire fence—below it a bank sloping down to the railway. No one would disturb us here at this hour. The nearest lamp was far away, the moonlight intermittent, the nearest buildings away down the line.

Mr. Dulice stopped a few paces away. "I didn't come across light-years of space to have my plans interrupted by meddlers," he said.

I wondered whether he held the resonator. Turned on me it could prove equally fatal.

"You cannot be allowed to settle on this planet," I pointed out, watching him keenly. "Succinctly you're a bad lot, Mr. Dulice."

"I make my way," he said.

I knew then that he had not got the resonator—probably had been unable to open the box. Had he, he would not have talked but acted and his action would have ended my part of the case. Now he came forward so that we were two paces apart.

"You know I shall have to kill you," he said.

"Of course—provided you have the chance."

He inclined his head. "I make my own chances."

We watched each other. In a way, we were evenly matched—now. Possibly his strength exceeded mine. From experience I knew that one of *them* could summon up great physical power when survival depended on it. Not the power of nerves and muscles of ordinary flesh but that of the interaction orbits of the molecules making up his form, that strength could be none the less nearly irresistible.

"You've often hunted us," he said. "It's a habit which should stop . . ."

"I'm paid for my work," I said, never looking from him.

He was watching for an opening. Suddenly—abruptly—it would be over, *for one of us.*

Then he moved—so did I. My hands clasped round one arm above the elbow and one leg by the knee, gripping with all my strength. He came up in my grasp like an empty,

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hollow dummy, struggling. He realised at that moment too that I had not fled this way without purpose.

He screamed as I flung him down towards the electrified rails. The cry echoed to the sky even as he descended. It was not a cry of terror but triumph.

"We were three! There's Piert!"

Then he touched the electrified rails. A flash glowed abruptly between earth and sky. He was almost as conductive as solid metal, I thought. Nothing of Mr. Dulice remained—only a wisp of thin green vapor drifting up on the night air and dispersing.

Piert, I thought. Piert, the leader—I should have known! But he had not been seen nor visible to follow. I had traced the two only. Such a plan was like Piert. He would go off alone—might now be lost in some populous city. Or again he might be near. Piert was the kind who stuck around to see things out—*in his own way* . . .

I turned from the fence quickly, eyes searching the road below and the expanse of turf, half expecting Piert to be there, waiting for me. Were he it would end *his way.* Piert was more than the equal of the two disposed of . . . worse, could have followed me while I had not suspected his presence . . .

A group of men was coming towards me, shouting. Those in the lead began to run, waving their arms.

"It was murder!" one cried.

They had seen me throw Dulice down and I ran. This was not the time for difficult explanations. As an agent one has to make one's own way out of difficulties. When the difficulties were of this type, an avoiding action was called for. Furthermore, while I argued Piert would *act.*

The hotel was quiet, the youth gone, possibly to get tea or coffee. I hurried to the room Mr. Dulice had hired and searched quickly. The metal box was not there. I went to my own room and traced back the way he must have gone, watching for likely hiding-places. There seemed to be none—or those I saw were too obvious for a mind of Mr. Dulice's calibre to adopt.

I went out of the hotel. Dulice had appeared to go left and the road was almost bare of hiding-places until the next corner. Beyond the corner was a railed garden, small and sunk below street level. At the bottom of steps was a metal box, shiny and new. I descended, brought it up, and unlocked it. The resonator safe in my pocket, I hesitated, then locked the box and returned it to its previous position. Piert was the type who would be aware of developments. He might know it was there, return to reassure himself or carry it off.

With everything I possessed on Earth stowed in my case I hurried out of the hotel, wondering if already too much time had been wasted. It would be wise to move

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on. Voices sounded along the street and three workmen came into view.

"That's him!" one shouted, pointing at me.

They had been quick in tracing me—almost too quick. The other way along the street others were coming, a torch bobbing in their leader's hands. Behind in the alley would be others. I wondered whether it was luck or whether Piert was present and had already acted.

I put down my case, waiting. The railwaymen were confident because of their numbers, yet hesitated to lay hands on me.

"We saw him throw the man down the embankment," one said to another. "It was attempted murder, clear as daylight."

I tensed my skin against their grasp but they only surrounded me, increasingly hesitant.

"Look," I said, "I'm an ordinary man. I ran—who wouldn't with a pack like you after him? If you think there's been murder done, then go back and look for the body!"

"It's a plan to get rid of us," one said.

I laughed. "If you think so, some go back and some stay."

"You're trying to leave town," another pointed out.

"So what? Who wouldn't, after being chased like a thief?"

They were silent, looking at each other. The enthusiasm of the first rush that had carried them after me was subsiding—some were beginning to doubt the truth of what they had seen.

"Perhaps we made a mistake . . ." one said.

"No. He threw him down, clear as daylight."

"It's a job for the authorities to look into," a third suggested.

I did not want that. The wheels of authority turn slowly and Piert would be hundreds of miles away by the time it was decided there was indeed no body.

"He's an ordinary looking kind of cove," the first man said. "Maybe it was all an—an illusion—"

Another man had come down the street behind them, and stood on the perimeter of the circle in shadow.

"That's your saloon in the open-air park down the road," he shot at me over their heads.

It was. I had bought it as the world could prove. I nodded. Something in the timber of the voice—something *lacking*—chilled me but I could not see him clearly over the surrounding heads.

The newcomer gave an exclamation. "He admits it! That's why you'll not find a body! I stayed behind, going down to see if the man was alive. He was dead. There's no body now." He pointed at me accusingly. "He came back, threw the body in his car and took it away. I *didn't* try to stop him—he had a gun. He's dumped both in the river in my opinion. It was quick work—but he had time to do it."

The workmen looked at the

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speaker. "Yes, I did notice this chap stay behind," one said.

Another nodded. "There'd be time to nip down to the bridge—"

I was afraid, then. Terribly afraid. They had lost an exact sense of the time that had passed. Worse, it *might* have been possible for me to have taken a body down to the river. Time had flown while I had been searching for the pedestal.

"It's all lies," I said. "I never had a gun."

"That's for a judge and jury to decide," they said, and pressed closely round me.

We walked noisily through the town. I was surrounded, and shaken. This was the kind of thing no agent likes to happen. We like secrecy. We expect no outside aid—know indeed, that there will be none forthcoming—and the situation was ugly. There was enough proof against me to keep me tied up so long that Piert could be ten thousand miles away and then it would take half a lifetime to find him.

The workmen told each other they had seen me do it, gaining confidence. "I still think there's been some mistake," one objected.

They silenced him. The mistake had been mine, coupled with bad luck that sent the late gang off work at that very moment when Dulice had pitched down on to the live rails.

They pressed closer as we neared the police station. "Where's that man who saw him take the body?" one asked. They needed to reassure themselves now.

"I'm here," the voice said.

It was slightly flat, yet somehow absolutely normal.

"Ah, you saw him," the man said, satisfied. "You'll have to tell the police. You're new here, eh?"

"I was going to the station to see if there were any late trains stopping." The newcomer was behind me, beyond the fringe of the crowd.

"No expresses stop here all night," someone said.

There was silence, then one said, "You'll need to give evidence. We didn't see him come back. What you saw is important. What's your name?"

"Peart," the man said. "Samuel Peart. I was at the hotel."

I knew then that Piert had engineered it and lied to convict me and wanted me to know. That was like him. He must have the satisfaction of knowing that I knew, thus doubling his own triumph. In that was his revenge for Iago and Diesnar and for all the others of his type I had hunted down.

"You're a stranger here?" one asked again.

"Yes."

He put the human sound of triumph into his voice, knowing I should hear it and understand and thus hate tenfold my defeat.

It was awkward. We agents like things to be kept quiet. We do not like a town stirred to awareness of our presence and actions. But things

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had gone too far. At that moment only a dozen workmen possessed the fringe of this knowledge, excluding Piert and myself. Of their number one doubted. The others were still so surprised they needed to reassure each other.

I halted and turned around. The newcomer was the youth of the hotel. "I didn't have time to take the body away, Mr. Peart," I said evenly. "But I did have time to find—and open—the box Mr. Dulice took."

It meant nothing to the workmen. For a second I savored the terror which instantly replaced Piert's satisfaction and which could be sensed with a feeling of almost physical impact. He had been clever, getting a job at the hotel. Then I pressed the lever of the pedestal.

Piert's outline wobbled, shrank inwards, and he dissipated away into faint green vapor which drifted and vanished like cigarette smoke on the evening air.

"Strewth!" a workman breathed.

I walked through them and ran. My feet made no sound. I heard their shouts as I reached my saloon but lost them as I drove for the valley. It had been an untidy case, I thought, but the workmen would end up doubting their own eyes.

I lifted my vessel, a mere lattice structure of girders thin as wire, from the water, set it on the bank and put up the force screens. My human shape, replica of the life-forms amid which I had moved, began to vanish. I glided into the vessel, set now for the Dog Star.

We police from Sirius do not like outlaws to prey upon unsuspecting worlds, however remote.

Current science fiction anthology editors, desperately scrambling to cull an already much-plucked field, are seeking to avoid the twin pitfalls in front of them—using stories already repeatedly reprinted in previous anthologies and using stories so recently published in magazines that they are fresh in the minds of the STF public—by asking "name" authors to write new stories for them. In some cases they are running new work by authors no one has ever heard of.

The inevitable results of this desperation policy are inferior quality and reduced sales, with the ultimate effect of doing some damage to the ever-growing field of science fiction itself. Few authors can afford to release new stories for the minescular royalties publishers of anthologies can afford to pay them as individuals—at least before such stories have been given an opportunity to earn magazine payment. In a number of instances—though not all by any means—what such authors have offered the anthologists are stories that have taken a bouncing around all over the magazine portion of the field.

Although what we are offering in FANTASTIC UNIVERSE is technically a periodical—magazine if you will—it is also an effort to give our readers an anthology of top-level stories by the best authors available. And every story is brand new!

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universe in books

by . . . the Editor

A critical study of new science fiction hard-cover publication.

BEYOND HUMAN KEN, edited by Judith Merril, Random House, New York ($2.95).

This is a good anthology. In fact, if it weren't for the great spate of similar collections that have poured from the nation's presses during the past two-three years, it would be a standout. Subtitled—presumably by the editrix (nasty word that)—*21 Startling Stories of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, this new volume offers a non-stenographer's spread of stories ranging in authorship all the way from Larry Manning's *Good-bye, Ilha!* to Stephen Vincent Benet's *The Angel Was a Yankee*, and in time from 1938 (Lester del Rey's marvelous *Helen O'Loy*) to five offerings that first found their way into the public prints as recently as last year.

Outside of the above-mentioned *Helen O'Loy*, with which or perhaps whom we fell completely in love during a previous anthologization, our favorites among a fat field include Bob Heinlein's gorgeous satire, *Our Fair City*, William Tenn's *The Fittest*, Padgett's *A Gnome There Was* and Idris Sea-

Books—novels, collections of short stories, anthologies, documentaries—in hard covers and pocket-sized reprints have become a major factor in science fantasy since 1946. Libraries and bookstores today have regular STF departments, crammed with books of all types and calibers. For the sake of reader and collector alike, this motley massing of material rates critical attention. Hence, Universe in Books. While you may not agree with our judgments it is our hope that from these reviews you will at least learn something about the nature and content of these offerings.

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bright's hilarious *The Man Who Sold Rope to the Gnoles*.

Preface and introduction are by Judith Merril and Fletcher Pratt respectively and if there is little left for anyone to say in the way of leading off for an stf anthology, these two manage it as expertly and charmingly as possible. For the rest, you'll have to pick your own favorites from a lush field that includes such solid and unstolid senders as Katherine MacLean, Malcolm Jameson, Roger Dee, Eric Frank Russell, Kris Neville, James Blish, Arthur Porges, Horace Fyfe, Tony Boucher, Murray Leinster, Mark Clifton, John Christopher, Fritz Leiber, Ted Sturgeon and an anonymous but far from uninteresting end-piece entitled simply *Bibliography*.

All in all, a hell of a lot of good reading!

THE CURRENTS OF SPACE by Isaac Asimov, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, New York ($2.75).

Mr. Asimov once again delves into large-scale social injustice (interplanetary in this instance), its causes and cures, once again manages to erect a more-than-reasonably dramatic edifice of intrigue, murder, with near-Spillane insistance although with the Spillane sadism at least motivated where not amputated entirely—and manages this despite the essential dismalness of his topic.

Essentially his problem is that of the planet Florina, which is held in merciless thrall by monopolists from the neighboring planet of Sark, who use its unique textile growths to promote their own wealth and self indulgence. Then, of course, there is a far from benevolent galactic empire watching the proceedings with interest, and a little group of Spatio-analysts from nearly-forgotten Earth, who have discovered a still-more gigantic threat to this portion of the universe than even the porcine Sarkites represent.

Hero (you'll pardon the expression, we hope) of this charivari is a Spatio-analyst whose findings prove so incidentally dangerous to the Sark monopolists that he is "probed"—in other words rendered temporarily mindless and deprived of his memories to boot—and deposited on Florina, where he becomes a plant raiser for the textile monopoly. A babe named Valona—kinda stupid, this one—takes him under one of her—er—rather large wings and tries to shield him from harm, which of course he gets into as soon as possible.

The only basic flaw we found in an otherwise entertaining job is the author's supposition that the worker-natives of Florina are badly off. In view of the debilitating effect of being rich on the Sarkites, it appeared to us they'd have been far better off had they switched places with their exploited neighbors. But then, it has always been an absurdly difficult job to convince the poor they are happier in their

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poverty than the rich in their ulcers. Which is a pity.

JUDGMENT NIGHT, a Selection of Science Fiction by C. L. Moore, Gnome Press, New York ($3.50).

Miss Moore (and if any readers don't know that this very attractive and very gifted lady is the wife of Henry Kutter-Lewis Padgett-Laurence O'Donnell etc. they should don their stf-dunce caps) has atmosphere. Along with Esther Carlsen, Margaret St. Clair and a handful of others she treads the feminine side of what has been perhaps too masculine a street—namely stf. Leigh Brackett, E. Mayne Hull, Idris Seabright and other gifted she-authors in the field tend to walk both sides or right down the middle.

In this collection she offers one novel (the title story), two short novels (*Paradise Street* and *The Code*) and a pair of novelets (*Promised Land* and *Heir Apparent*), and while they deal in part with every stf-subject from intragalactic war to personal murder with handblasters, somehow the delicacy, the impervious crystal femininity remains.

We hope this view, thusly expressed, does not in any way injure the sale of this volume with the immediate post-beanie masculine set of potential readers. They'll find it as exciting and imaginatively intriguing a volume as anything by A. E. van Vogt or Dr. E. E. Smith —and besides, if they're old enough to read, it's time they began to derive at least a smidgin of vicarious entertainment from the in this case comely sex.

THE LEGION OF TIME by Jack Williamson, Fantasy Press, Reading, Pennsylvania ($3.00).

This is the noted space operateur at his Will Stewart-*Seetee Shock* best, in a modernization and blow-up of a serial first published back in 1938. The noted dilletante of collapsing universes and super-BEMs opens this job prosaically enough on the campus (pardon, in the Yard) of Harvard College, back in the boomtime twenties.

He seems to have gone in heavily for the letters a-n in his character names, for they include Dennis *Lan*ning, Wilmott McL*an* and Lao Meng Sh*an*, to say nothing of Lanning's closest friend, Barry Hallor*an*. More intriguing are a couple of dames named Lethonee and Sorainya, who come popping out of probable futures to woo the surfaces of these four Browns—pardon, Ans—of Harvard, Lethonee to win their services in the battle for her as yet non-existent future, Sorainya to prevent that future from becoming fact.

If this sounds complicated, it is. But things happen at such a pace, from the time Denny Lanning is plucked from death while air-fighting the Japanese over Chapei by an also-dead Wilmot McLan, who has emerged from the future in a swift-flying time-ship to pick up a sort of Foreign Legion of pro-

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fessional adventurers—from then until Bari dies again, this goes buckety-buck so fast the reader has to accept the plot and its complexities without quibble or else.

If you go for Williamson in this vein (we prefer him in his werewolf or *Darker Than You Think* mood), you're in for a ride on a real roller-coaster.

THE NEXT MILLION YEARS by Charles Galton Darwin, Doubleday & Co., Inc., New York City ($2.75).

Sir Charles Darwin, grandson of the author of *The Origin of Species*, which of course set off the whole evolution thing, here indulges in a little truly long-range prophecy. Himself a nuclear phycisist of note, Sir Charles takes the view that mankind can expect no evolutionary improvement for at least the term of his title, that people will continue to do much the same old things for the same old reasons during that period.

Regarding the species with almost terrifying detachment, he has reached the conclusion that most of what we consider virtues—morality, self-sacrifice etc.—are actually luxuries that can be indulged in only when the matter of survival is easy. For, in Sir Charles' view, survival is everything. And who is to say him nay? Certainly no species that has failed to survive.

Incidentally he takes no account of the possibility of space-flight or the spread of Earthmen and women to other planets in the next million years. Probably, if he had, he'd have stated that the same old hunger cycle would merely have been extended through the universe. Sir Charles' prophecy is a strangely fascinating one for all of its grimness—and, we fear, soundly based.

FUTURE TENSE, edited by Kendell Foster Crossen, Greenberg, New York City. ($3.50).

Another anthology which features so-called "new" stories (50%) as well as a number culled from the oft-culled fields of the stf pulp magazines. The "used-car" section includes Tony Boucher's *The Ambassadors*, Hank Kuttner's *Dream's End*, his wife's *Scarlet Dream* (dreamy pair, these Kuttners) and solidly excellent tales by Peter Phillips, Ward Moore, Miriam Allen deFord and Mr. Crossen. As the title reveals, all of them are concerned with things to come.

The "new" section is more uneven—which is probably not to be helped. *Cyclops* by H. F. Heard is perhaps the most powerful tale in the entire anthology and the other authors are Bruce Elliott, Rose Bedrick Elliott, Martin Gardner, James Blish, John D. MacDonald and Christopher Monig. As we have stated, their quality is uneven. One, which shall be nameless, we bounced years ago while sitting in another editorial chair.

However, *Future Tense* is well worth the price on its jacket flap.

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THE PAST, THE PRESENT, AND THE FUTURE

Science fantasy—science fiction if you prefer—like Caesar's Gaul, or the visions conjured up for Scrooge by Marley's ghost, can be divided into three parts—Past, Present, Future.

Although specialized magazine publication of what passes today for science fantasy has existed for less than thirty years, the pre-World-War-Two era has already receded into the mists of legend. Indeed the gulf between Science Fantasy Past and Science Fantasy Present widens with each passing month.

In its prehistoric or sub-Jurassic period science fantasy was a fabric of wondrous gadgets and appalling BEMs (bug-eyed monsters), peopled by the palest shadows of cardboard "human" characters. Its flesh wore gleaming metallic or plastic surfaces, its only blood flowed from gaping wounds ray-blasted in scaly alien hides.

Today the robot and cybernetic machines, along with the nuclear physics and rocketcraft that were sheer fantasy but a few years back, have in many instances become realities. With the vast snowballing of all the sciences, mere gadgetry has worn thin.

But the people have donned three dimensions. It is human action and reaction to the alien, to the speculative unexpected, that is the meat of Science Fantasy Present. Emotion, in many instances beautifully expressed, has replaced routine awe of the machine per se.

We are all for the change and are proud to have an opportunity, in this magazine, perhaps to bring the spectacle of Man against the cosmos closer to truth, even while widening the fantastic elements of that spectacle. Paradox? You are free to make the most of it.

As for Science Fantasy Future—we're on the lookout for it with eager anticipation. So if you happen to stumble across any good stf tales not yet written, please let the authors know about us. We'd like a look at their work.

—The Publisher.

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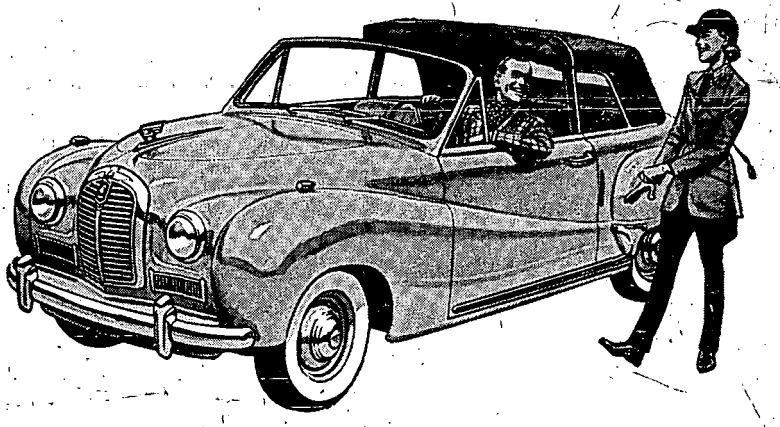
Austin announces a new convertible



This new AUSTIN A-40 "Coupé de Ville" Convertible has a 3-position top that's truly continental. It cruises along at 65, cuts your operating expenses up to 50%, and delivers a good 35 miles per gallon! Underneath its smart exterior, you'll find a steel body that's extra tough. The price is the "pay off"! Only $1945 f.o.b. coastal port of entry including $250 worth of "free" extras and all Federal taxes.

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